Privilege: A Novel of the Transition

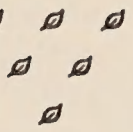
By Michael Sadleir

PRIVILEGE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

HYSSOP: A NOVEL

THE ANCHOR:
A LOVE
STORY



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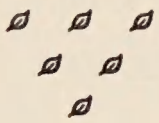
A · NOVEL · OF · THE TRANSITION · BY MICHAEL SADLEIR



LONDON: CONSTABLE
& COMPANY LIMITED

First Published . . *Jan.*, 1921.
Reprinted . . . . *Jan.*, 1921.
Reprinted . . . . *Feb.*, 1921.
Reprinted . . . . *March*, 1921.
Revised and Reprinted *May*, 1921.

To

ELIZABETH

for obvious reasons

and to the

gracious memory

of

WILLIAM BECKFORD

OF

FONTHILL

who found in kindliness

and in the egoism

of

secluded splendour

the

true gentility

I DEDICATE

this book.

ADVERTISEMENT

This story is in the form of personal narrative, because there are certain shades of language and feeling that seem unattainable by other means. I am aware that no writer in retrospect could, without deliberate fabrication, record the events of his life in the studied manner of which Richard Braden is guilty. I am also aware that no explanation is offered of the reason for their being recorded at all.

My object in permitting to my imaginary hero so prolonged and so improbable an opportunity of egoism is the object, as I conceive it, of any novelist—the provision of entertainment by narrative and by the presentation of individual character and period psychology. Whether or no the book succeeds in its purpose is for its readers to decide. If it fails to divert, the fault and the misfortune are mine. Lest, however, I also be blamed for distortion of likelihood in the designing of its structure, I desire, as it were on the threshold of Whern Abbey, to declare complete unrepentance for my error.

Finally, I would assure my readers that all the characters in this book, both engaging and repellent, are purely fictitious.

MICHAEL SADLEIR.

PRIVILEGE

CHAPTER I

1.

"MAN that is born of a woman hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower; he fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay."

The words hovered one moment in the air, and the next, jerked on to the back of the sulky wind, were borne faintly wailing towards the long, wet woods of Whern. The parson, his surplice twitched hither and thither by the gusts of wind, the leaves of his Prayer Book fluttering beneath his restraining thumbs, bent his head a fraction lower and continued his monotonous, muted rendering of the burial service.

"... to take unto himself the soul of our dear *brother* here departed, we therefore commit *his* body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust——"

With a strange feeling of detachment I focussed before my eyes the ironic discomfort of the scene. Through a veil of mist, spotted with drops of rain, and as though they were set in the frozen perspective of a stereoscope, I saw my brothers, my sisters, the handful of relatives, and—at a respect-

ful distance—the crowd of villagers. The black clothes cut stencils on the greyness—curious, rigid stencils of conventional form—so that the figures had little more human significance than the yew-trees dotted among the graves. And then the chasm of the grave itself—our grave, our father's grave, the grave of Black Whern—a foolish pit lined with green and white, scored irrelevantly across the sodden turf. Ironic it was that Black Whern who, when there was not room, forced a way and let the weaker give place, should now at his end encounter a throng even he could not displace—the throng of the dead. He would have his stately tombstone in the church, but his body would rot among those of carters and woodcutters with little to mark the place of its decomposition except, maybe, a headstone a little more ornate, a railing a little more elaborate than those on either hand.

"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost, be with us all evermore."

The parson closed his book and, his hands clasped before him, bowed his head over the grave in prayer. What prayers was he saying for Black Whern? Did he remember dinners at the Abbey when the old man would insult his cloth, taunt his submissiveness, make mock of his embarrassed silences? Did he remember the great day when the fox took cover behind the chancel screen? Did he see once more hounds streaming up the nave with my father in their midst kicking and

swearing—for no huntsman dared gainsay Black Whern however foul his hunting manners—the moment of ugly scrimmage, the shatter of glass as one of the lamp standards caught a brandished crop, the kill in the chancel itself under the very eyes on the one hand of Black Whern terribly alive, swarthy and exultant, on the other of the pale effigies of his ancestors, couched stiffly tier above tier in the rigid armour of their time? What prayers, indeed, could be said for Black Whern?

Then in my cynicism I looked at the mourners. Harold—Lord Whern at last—held his silk hat unflinchingly, and his too full lips were set into something approaching gravity. He was like the dead man, with all the cruelty gone to sensuality, all the rugged strength to the lax lines of good living. I wondered if he were moved. Likely enough. Men of his type are easily swayed to pompous solemnity. As a child, as a youth, he had gone through alternating fits of sentiment and selfishness. Probably for the moment he felt genuine grief, but even so rare a profundity could not make him dignified. He was handsome, and a fine figure of a man; but he was soft—at once soft and reckless, a product of great traditions and too much facility for self-indulgence. Well, well—doubtless there had been Bradens like him before; but some forgotten flicker of family pride scorched my heart one moment with regrets. Michael would have made a worthier heir, thin-lipped, intractable though he was. He was holding himself very straight, and his fine, pale brow

and narrow eyes showed neither sign nor pretence of grief. Rather it was contempt that he felt for the whole scene—contempt primarily for the corpse, then for the shivering clergyman, for the crumbling tower, for the humble headstones planted crazily about the grass (like the almonds on Ursula's ice pudding that July night five years ago—the foolish memory hurt as keenly as though it had been yesterday that her bitter words had driven me into the stifling streets to limp lonely to my rooms). . . . I riveted my mind on the present and found that my attention, unsupported by conscious reasoning, had left Michael and passed to Monica. Arrogantly she held herself, beautiful in her black, her golden hair like the flash of a bird in flight under the brim of her small, defiant hat. Rakish almost that hat, in view of the occasion, but wonderfully Monica. Cold she looked—cold, proud, magnificent—and again my cynicism smiled inwardly, gloating a little, for I knew Monica for the loose, flashy thing she was, whose extravagances were the delight of keyhole whisperers, whose shipwreck on some shoal of prudery every muck-raker of the servile Press that at present fawned about her little shoes looked for and forward to. Poor Monica! But she had fearlessness and a nobility that in those early days I was too shallow to detect. And finally, when the crash came, she held her head high and smiled that brilliant smile, and I, for one, loved her in her failure as I had never loved her during the vivid years of her success.

And then Anthony. Perhaps it was only his

greater youth that gave him transparency and charm. But Harold was gross, Michael pitiless, Monica blatant, in comparison with his graceful reverence. His fair hair and long, pale face, the curve of his arm and relaxed right leg blended with the sadness of the day, while the others were hostile blots on the compassionate shroud of autumn. Anthony in normal life was languid and a thing of mannerisms. He collected jade, went to confession, wore black pyjamas with a scarlet belt. And even now, in my softened mood, I seemed to detect a whiff of the scent he used, and as I smelt it the gulf between me and this my family widened once again and Anthony became as much an interruption as the rest, perhaps the more repulsive for his very elegance.

The group swayed and broke. Harold was moving towards the churchyard gate. One by one the others turned to follow. I stepped back and looked about for Mary. A few moments before I had seen her standing demurely beside Monica her black coat dowdy (or maybe beautiful with the beauty of a different world) in comparison with the elaborate simplicity of the other's fur-trimmed velvet. Mary was the youngest of us, at that time just eighteen to Anthony's twenty, to my twenty-seven. Even those of us who were privileged to be children of Black Whern could only guess at the secret of those seven years during which our mother had had no child. Our nurses, perhaps and old Studland, the butler; the London specialits, a handful of relations . . . they may have known

the truth. I gleaned something of it when I came of age because—well, I suppose they thought my withered foot entitled me to a word of explanation. Yet Anthony was sound, though delicate, and Mary frankly healthy. An odd thing, heredity. I was often struck by the difference between the four elder of us and the two who formed the postscript of the family. All the harshness of the breed seemed to have ended with me. Anthony had pliability and Mary gentle persistence where we others had turbulence or arrogance or reckless levity or self-protective irony. Perhaps because I came last of the first litter (the brutal metaphor was my father's before it became a commonplace of statesmanship) I was more sympathetic to the younger ones than were my seniors. Certainly I loved Mary as, to the time of which I am speaking, I had loved no one else, and Anthony's effeminacy called to the banter that was my kindliness more than to my scorn. That the adaptable may become flaccid and the quietly persistent fanatical, after events taught but too thoroughly. Perhaps I should have foreseen them; if so, my obtuseness has been punished.

I looked about for Mary, and, as I looked, she crept from behind the shrub at the grave head and, casting a flower into the hole, stood for a moment solitary on the brink, her hands clasped lightly, her face impassive. She was about to hurry away when she saw me watching her.

"I should like to walk home, Dick," she said. "Would it bore you too much?"

We explained to the others, waiting impatiently by the short line of motors in the road. Monica shrugged and stepped into the limousine. One by one the " mourners " found places, and with a throb and a screech the cars slid towards Whern. The men touched their hats, and one or two old women curtsied as I limped up the village street by Mary's side.

The hamlet of Whern St. Nicholas lies to the south of the Abbey grounds in a shallow dip between the still more southerly downland and the gradual slope to the lip of the curious crater in which the home of my ancestors was situated. The road begins to rise directly one leaves the schoolhouse on the left-hand side, but does not, for the ordinary traveller, rise all the way, as it turns half a mile northward of the village and traces a switchback easterly course skirting the crumbling wall that marks the boundary of the Abbey woods. Mary and I entered these woods by a gap in the wall and began to pick our way upwards through the damp leaf drifts and among the lichenous tree-trunks.

The year was rotting to its end. Along the carpet of trodden leaves, brown-yellow with an occasional slashing of vivid green, the trees crept like mildewed ghosts, an endless procession of noiseless spectres, emerging from one tangled mistiness only to blend instantly with another.

The solitude of this familiar woodland seemed peopled with melancholy sprites. Each raindrop clinging to a twig was a tear for the decay of

Whern, each gurgle of the spongy ground a sob for the late autumn of an ancient race. I saw our beloved woods with new and older eyes. The few and brief visits to Whern which I had paid during the last ten years had been visits of duty, and I had only found their constraint and antagonism endurable thanks to a deliberate keeping alive of memories of happier childhood. Indeed, more than once I had sought out some corner of the woods—an abandoned pump-house which had been our brigands' cave, an overgrown quarry in which we had hunted grizzlies, practised rock-scrambling, picnicked on golden summer afternoons —to brace myself for an evening in my father's company. Now, for the first time, I let slip make-believe and left to the past the lure of its own witchery. I saw Whern and its woods and ourselves, its inheritors, sinking, as the old year was sinking, towards an inevitable December. The blaze of autumn is a painted flame, without heat, without core; Black Whern, for all his apparent strength, was a braggart and a thing of hollow sound. He was dead, and the October leaves were wind-tossed and stained with damp. Where they had flaunted their transient glory were now naked twigs; even the few that clung still in foolish obstinacy to the trees hung limply and askew. In the seat of Black Whern was Harold. And there were tears in my heart because of the great past of Braden and because death is angry sadness to the young.

We had not spoken since entering the woods. Our silence and the gloom of my own thoughts

prompted me to that awkward levity which was my treacherous refuge from embarrassment.

" Thank God, that's over !"

Mary did not answer, but bent her head and hurried forward. I cursed myself for a blunderer.

" What is the matter, Mary ?"

" Oh, Dick—nobody cared. Not one of you cared an atom. Poor, poor father !"

" He was an old man, child, and a lonely one. Don't grudge him his rest."

" Grudge it ! If you knew how I envied it !"

" Mary ! To talk like that !"

She turned on me.

" You haven't to live on here—with Harold."

Her bitterness startled me, and my uneasiness increased to see her quiet eyes dark with dread.

" But, child—you can come to Monica——"

" She would thank you for saying that, and so do I !"

" Well, then, to me."

" I may do that, Dick dear, sometime. But you don't really want me—and, besides, I cannot run away before the battle."

She was tired and nervous, and this intensity was, according to my then superficial judgment, too foreign to Mary to be real. So I merely said:

" That is a promise, then. You can come to me when you wish, and I will try to veil my reluctance to receive you."

Perhaps the conventional irony did service on that occasion. At any rate Mary brightened, and we spoke no more of the funeral nor of its problems.

2.

I suppose the others had been in an hour or more when we reached the Abbey. Lunch had draggled off into cheese and crumbled bread, with Anthony like some fastidious bird still picking delicately at its fringe. He explained that the relations had gone . . . trains . . . only "us" left. While waiting for fresh food, and too lazy to follow Mary's lead and go upstairs to change, I wandered towards the billiard-room in search of further company. Across the hall through the front door I saw a small mauve car like an enamelled snail waiting in the drive. At that moment Monica appeared by the baize doors of the library corridor; they snapped to behind her with their curious sound that suggested an angry dog with no bark. She took no notice of me, but going to the foot of the staircase removed the cigarette from her mouth and shouted:

"Fli-im!"

There was no reply.

"Fli-im! Where the devil have you got to? I'm ready!"

Still no reply.

"Fli-i-i-im!"

"Better," I remarked. "Much better. But remember to trill on the high note and to throw the head well back."

She turned to see who was speaking.

"Hullo, Dick," she said carelessly. "Got in from your weep-walk? Have you seen Flim anywhere?"

" Anything is possible," I replied. " What is it ?"

Ignoring me completely, she began to shout once more, this time with better fortune.

" All right, all right ! I'm coming," said a male voice a little testily, and a small, springy man with cheeks shaved black and tight, close-cropped black moustache hurried from the far corner of the hall. He was wearing very new herring-bone tweeds of striking cut and a stiff, pink-lined turn-over collar with a bow tie. Altogether a nasty little man.

" God bless the man !" cried Monica. " Where the hell have you been ? Here am I waking the dead——"

" I am even surprised you remember there are dead to wake, Monica."

The sardonic interruption came from one of the small balustraded galleries that on the first-floor landing overlook the central octagon of the hall. Michael leant a little forward to see the effect of his remark, and I could see the righteous cruelty of his contemptuous mouth. Monica turned her back angrily, but I noticed that her voice was sensibly lowered when she spoke again.

" Shall we push off right away ?"

Her friend nodded and muttered inaudibly, glancing round for a servant. One of the men crossed the hall to the dining-room with the preliminaries of lunch for Mary and myself.

" Hullo—you there !" shouted the little stranger. " Fetch me my coat, and be quick about it !"

I chuckled. Verily there were rents already in

the garment of our inheritance. The footman—he was a junior and nervous—vanished into the dining-room and reappeared immediately in search of the coat. I shrank back in the shadow of a pillar lest the departing, if unbidden, guest should see me—and delay his going. Michael, from his vantage post, observed in silence. Monica had gone through the outer hall to the front door and was standing on the steps gazing sulkily at the tearful sky. With some struggling the stranger settled his coat to his liking, placed a Homburg slightly askew upon his head, and swaggered absurdly towards his car.

When the mauve snail had crawled out of sight I crossed the hall to the dining-room and began lunch. Mary came down in a few moments. We ate determinedly.

"Coffee in the billiard-room?"

I told the man and followed Mary thither. In front of a huge wood fire Harold sprawled his great bulk on a lounge chair. Whisky stood by his side. The hearthrug seemed solid dog, for on it, in a fair imitation of their master's attitude, lay an Irish wolfhound, three spaniels, and a rough-haired terrier. Over the huge and hideous room brooded the spirit of stupor after gluttony. Harold greeted us without emotion.

"Hullo! Had lunch?"

We advanced to the outworks of the nearest dog.

"Cold . . ." I said suggestively. "Isn't it?"

Harold grunted. Then with a crooked grin he hoisted himself to one elbow.

"Scared of the dogs, eh? Poor little Polly. She shan't be plagued with nasty dogs. Get away, you brutes!"

His kick cleared a pathway to the fire. Mary slipped to the curb and settled on the fire-seat. From the edge of the billiard table I swung my legs.

With the coffee came Michael, cool and correct in a short black coat. It was like Michael to have changed his morning coat and nothing more. He walked quietly to the fire, trod on the tail of the fattest spaniel, stepped neatly over the fire-seat, and wedged his shoulders against the chimney breast, his feet against the curb. Harold, from the shapeless mass of his old shooting suit, glanced sullenly upwards. He was doubtless painfully aware—for even I had a foreboding—that Michael was about to hold forth.

"Where is Monica?"

Harold shrugged sleepily.

"Who was that little swine with her in the hall?"

"In the hall," replied Harold.

"What do you mean—in the hall?" asked Michael crossly.

"Trying to answer your question, old chap," grumbled Harold. "You asked where Monica was. I replied, 'In the hall,' a reply which, on your own showing, is correct."

Michael sniffed.

"No—seriously, Harold. You must speak to Monica. It's rotten bad form to import a little

bounder like that on the day of father's funeral and then go screaming for him all over the house as if it were a railway-station. You're the head of the family."

Harold grinned.

"What a prig you are, Michael! As if it mattered. He's not a bad fellow either, is little Grayshott. Damn fine horseman. He told me of a horse. . . ."

Michael turned to me.

"Dick, for God's sake, say something!"

I was apt to shirk on these occasions, and for the moment, although I was with him on the particular point, Michael's tactlessness made me hate him.

"'Railway-station' is very good," I said reflectively. "I have long wanted to know what Whern reminded me of. Of course—a railway-station. Perhaps Monica thought it was St. Pancras and wanted a porter."

Harold guffawed.

"Monica's quite capable of wanting half a dozen porters if they were good-looking," he said.

Mary shifted in her place and glanced appealingly towards me. Michael darted a furious look at Harold, shook himself free of the chimney-piece, and walked quickly from the room.

Clearly the subject required changing.

"Well, Harold, what's the next move? Are you going to make a coronation speech to the tenants?"

"God!" replied Harold; "I see myself."

Anthony lounged into the room.

"Exquisite!" he explained mincingly. "The purple-browns and greys. . . . And the sad menace of the down. . . . Harold, the old brandy is finished. I was constrained to finish my lunch *sans liqueur*."

I condoned. Harold sniffed loudly.

"You smell like a girl," he growled.

Anthony smiled gently.

"Parfum d'amour—what is more delicate
The frail white flesh——"

Mary got up and hurried to the door. On the threshold she turned passionately.

"Father is dead," she cried, "and *you* are his sons. . . ."

Her voice broke and she vanished from sight.

Harold sniggered.

"Dramatic," he said. "She gets on my nerves, that girl. Too damn pernickety."

"Only Victorian," drawled Anthony. "Were she not one's sister one would say bourgeoise. But there is infinite freshness in virtue. Indeed, maidenhood is getting fashionable again."

"It's never been very cheap," sneered Harold.

"Gross—gross," murmured Anthony.

And once more I chuckled.

CHAPTER II

1.

If I write something now of the Whern I knew and loved, it is perhaps as much to convince myself of what I won when I lost it, and to brush away from the memory of the crowded years that followed my father's death the cobwebs of wistful sentiment, as to provide a proper setting for my narrative. The "Dream Palace" that one reads of in the letters of its creator, the fantastic erection—adorable in its very absurdity—in which I was born and in which I spent my childhood, has vanished now even more completely than has Beckford's Abbey of Fonthill, its inspiration and its prototype. What strange misfortune pursues things, animate and inanimate, that defy the custom of their time? Has conformity a divine sanction after all? While they remained decorous children of their age the Bradens, in their unobtrusive way, prospered. One erratic, decadent genius, twenty short years of feverish eccentricity, and the centuries of steady if stupid growth counted for but a fraction of their lasting. Lancelot Braden died loathsomely under the soaring vault of his mighty house not three months after the last touch of gilding had dried on the weather vane of the northern tower. Geoffrey, his nephew and

successor and my grandfather, was killed in the Crimea. My father, an ironical exception, lived out his passionate life to its forlorn and solitary end. Subsequent events—the fun grew fast and furious—are my story. Many a time have I felt the grim justice of my melancholy on that wet woodland walk with Mary, of my sense of strange and desolate happenings brooding over Whern and over Braden. . . .

In a great cup of the Wiltshire hills, under the lee of the western slope and on the bank of a shallow lake made by a stream that traversed the arena from north to south, there were erected in the eleventh century a Cistercian abbey and cloister, which took their name from the hamlet of Whern lying in the adjoining valley. The foundation was not a rich one, as the place was at once remote and too near Sarum to flourish more than modestly. Its obscurity did not, however, save it at the Reformation, and its lands and buildings were bestowed by the Crown on Sir Richard Braden, whose father had joined Henry Tudor on his march to Bosworth Field, taking in his train young Richard and a company of yokels from his home in the Welsh marches. The lad by his skilful parade of shrewd economy at the expense of other people won the approval of the new king, and, with the coming of Henry VIII., was knighted with a place at court. The bestowal of Whern paid the loyal debt of gratitude for a variety of services, rendered staunchly and with tact, and

began the transfer of the Braden home from Shropshire to Wiltshire, which by the end of the sixteenth century was finally accomplished. It seems that a succession of unambitious and none too durable houses sheltered those ancestors of mine that held Whern from the accession of James I. to the time of the French Revolution. Perhaps every second generation pulled down and began afresh. Certainly, at stated intervals, the ruins of the old Abbey were pillaged for material, and the original and noblest Whern of all faded into a tattered fragment of ghost-grey loneliness, while across the green basin of the wooded hollow house after transient house blossomed and died.

Then came the reign of great-uncle Lancelot, the birth of the Braden peerage, the meteor splendour of golden Whern, and—the zenith passed—the tilt on to the final downward slope to decadence.

I have spoken of Fonthill as the inspiration and the prototype of Whern. It was more than that. It was its material as well as its spiritual forbear, some part of Whern being actually fashioned of the marble, stone, and glass of the notorious non-such wonderland of an hundred years ago. This makes it all the more surprising that in an age of rapid tourism so few would-be visitors stopped their cars for an hour or two at the high cross-roads on the down, or forced the slumbrous peace of Whern Royal to stay a night at the really admirable inn and catch a glimpse of a house which was, with all its faults of beauty, undoubtedly unique.

Deliberately I concentrate on Whern and not on

its creator, for this is the story of my brothers and sisters and myself, and not of our ancestors. But, freely, the tale of Lancelot Braden, first Viscount Whern ("Great-Uncle Lance" we always called him, the familiarity mirroring the admiring repulsion in which, by tradition, we held his memory), would make finer and more sensational reading than that of our more discreet shortcomings. Some other time, perhaps. . . . Enough, here, to state that Lancelot Braden, vastly rich, physically beautiful, saw in the pioneer gestures of the great William Beckford a hint for his own super-eccentricity; that he became first an admirer, then a protégé, finally an adoring intimate of the Sultan of Lansdowne Tower; that, whereas London knew him only as a figure of sinister and remote licentiousness, to Bath he was a frequenter of the treasure-house in Lansdowne Terrace, a companion of old Beckford on his rides along the down, an enthusiast for sale catalogues, rare manuscripts, pictures of foreign schools. Concerning the strange friendship rumours went about; in explanation of the bestowal by George IV. on Lancelot of a peerage the coffee-houses knew something more substantial and less savoury than even the basest rumour. . . . But all this, again, is irrelevant. Let us get back to Whern.

It is history that in 1823 Beckford, mainly for reasons of economy, but partly also from disgust at realising the frauds practised on him by his architect, sold the entire Fonthill estate, including the famous abbey, to a Mr. Farquhar. It is also

history that, not long after completing his purchase, the new owner saw the great tower fall down (for the second time in its brief period of life) and decided to cut his losses and sell the mansion for building material. At this point, where history turns to things of greater moment, Braden family pride takes up the tale. Under other names, and unknown either to Farquhar or to Beckford, Lancelot Braden, then twenty-five years old, bought a large part of the more decorative elements and caused them to be transferred, circuitously and unobtrusively, over the hills to Whern, which was not many miles away. He was no fool, and made a good bargain. He argued that Wyatt, however dishonest in his furnishing of the hidden essentials of good building, was not likely in those externals visible and of greatest interest to the owner to use anything but the best quality of material; further, that the second collapse of the structure would so rudely have shocked the facile admiration of the crowd for Beckford and his works, that prices might be expected to rule low. On the whole, he argued soundly, and became possessed of a quantity of fine carving, rare marbles, and unusual architectural miscellanea at a reasonable figure. The way was then open for the building of yet another Whern.

And what a Whern! An extravagant façade, three soaring towers, a nightmare chapter-house, cloisters, and flying buttresses. . . . On the hills above Oban on the west coast of Scotland stands

a foolish parody of a Roman coliseum—but built of rosy stone some two feet thick. From below, the idiot edifice seems to be cut from cardboard. And so it was, in less degree, with Lancelot Braden's Gothic abbey. One felt that every artifice had been used to extend that ribbon of crisped and crotcheted exoticism as far as possible along the north-eastern slope of the wooded basin. At the same time, the house had no depth; it was flush with the drooping margin of the woods; a demented vision of the medieval age, slung like a painted cloth along the ancient Wiltshire hill.

I loathe its memory, and yet I loved it. There is a point when improbability becomes logic once again. Maybe the astounding contrast between Lancelot Braden's abbey and the mouldering shred of ruined dignity across the tranquil lake had in itself something of greatness. Maybe, also, some spark of my great-uncle's feverish allegiance to the Gothic style (sad, misguided fanaticism that thought to recapture spirit by reproducing trappings only) burnt always like a mystic lamp within the temple of his fashioning, and, by its glimmer, drew my pilgrim spirit to the shrine it served.

But I think in reality my love for Whern was partly love for Braden, partly yearning fondness for the English country that no defilement can rob of its sweet soundness. On snowy days, when the wooded slope glittered with frost jewels, when the frozen lake was like a sheet of polished pewter athwart the black-green of the iron-hard turf; in May, when the leaves sang their colour

part in the spring symphony and the marshy ground by the stream was powdered with meadow saxifrage and marigold; in summer rain, when through the streaming curtain of the rain the old Abbey and the climbing woods drooped in the weeping heat; in the pale melancholy of October sunlight, when the whole Whern arena seemed sinking to sensuous sleep under the caressing mist, when even the new house took on the unearthly fineness of a mirage-city, when the trees—from palest yellow, through red and brown to dark, defiant green—bent like high tiers of praying women beneath the slow veils of the mist—my home, because it was home and yet not only because it was, had loveliness and Englishry, and my heart was wrung for it, being forsaken of its age.

2.

Whern Woods cover the whole rim of the arena in which the Abbey stood, spreading to the level bottom on the inside and some way down the outer slopes to the south, west, and east. On the north there is no outer slope, the rim of the crater being the edge of a high plateau of downland over which in winter blow black winds to rattle the bare boughs of the twisted trees that mark the outskirts of the wood, and then to slant their bitter course diagonally downwards to the frozen lake. The titanic fancies of great-uncle Lancelot did not spare the woods, but the power and age of their beauty had absorbed his freakishness and given it

that melancholy charm which is the lure of all human handicraft abandoned by its creators and subject to the nature it provoked. Thus, apart from the usual scattering of small classic temples, the usual moss-grown fauns and nymphs in glade and dell, there existed (and for all that I know may exist to this day) a chain of fishponds—five or six of them on descending levels—created, doubtless, to satisfy our great-uncle's sense of monastic fitness. Wide flagstones edged these oblong ponds in which two feet of water, filmed with weed, lay stagnant. Decorative gratings, masking the overflow from one pond to another, were long since choked with slime and mud and rust. Grasses, pushed into life between the flags, dropped nonchalant, untidy heads over the edges of the paving. The ponds were in a shallow valley from which the woods held back in humorous contempt. The spring that fed them was, in our day, little more than a stirring of dampness, but it must have survived, for I never remember the ponds being dry. I suppose that under the blind surface of the weeds a senile flow of water was at work, humbly secret, patiently struggling to fulfil the dream of the man who first yoked it to his will. I shudder a little now at the thought of wading in those fetid pools. But as a boy I taunted Monica with the best of them because she shrank from dirtying her white feet in the pulp of the clinging slime. Harold's favourite game was to take the whole chain of ponds in a series of flying leaps so that mud and water splashed the bushes

on either hand, and our sisters and girl guests fled shrieking out of range. Naturally I was debarred from this amusement, but perhaps the limited range of bullying possibilities made me doubly ingenious. At any rate, I well remember sitting on a plank across the lowest and dirtiest pond and holding Anthony head downwards over the water until he promised to give up some boyish Naboth's vineyard that I coveted. I was strong in the arms and thighs, and his struggles were fruitless. Whether I achieved my purpose or what that purpose was, I no longer recall. Why does one remember the methods of torture and neither the object nor the end of it? I can understand Inquisitors not being themselves always very perfect Catholics.

Another much-loved legacy of great-uncle Lancelot's was the miniature feudal fortress on the crag. In one part of the woods the hill is so steep that there is an outcrop of rock and quite a decent little cliff. Ingeniously perched on an outstanding rocky bluff our enthusiastic ancestor had caused to be built a Norman keep with turrets and barbican. The whole affair was not forty feet in height, but its folly among the shrubs and mountain-ash and tufts of bilberry, the hollies and oaks and woodland commonplace of Whern, obscurely fascinated even our barbarian boyhood. I could hardly approach it without a thrill, and I think we all fell uneasily silent as we clambered up the woods towards the rocky corner where it stood, peering through the trees for a first glimpse

of its rough stonework, catching our breath at the imagined sight of a face framed in one of the three narrow windows of the tower. Psychologists might detect prophetic imagination in our youthful terrors, for Otranto (as we called it) was to play a grim part in the lives of all of us. I prefer to think that the subconscious influence, if such existed, was the malignancy of great-uncle Lance rather than our own sense of coming tragedy.

Finally—and at once the most terrifying and the most extraordinary of all the embellishments lavished by Lancelot Braden on his woods—there were the Tilting Knights. High on the eastern slope, in a sudden crease of the hill, were two colossal mounted figures carved in stone and representing knights in full armour riding to the shock of tournament. Some twenty yards apart, these monster imbecilities hung on the frozen gallop of their steeds, perpetually plunging at each other, perpetually motionless, while nettles grew to choke their horses' feet, birds defiled their visored heads and built nests in the crook of their lance-arms, and the lush vitality of the indifferent forest swelled from brown to green and shrank to brown again, leaving them grey and dead and fatuous. Frankly, we were frightened of the Tilting Knights, frightened but hypnotised. One winter evening Harold bet me his stamp collection I would not go and tie a skipping-rope round the leg of one of the horses, as proof the next day that I had indeed braved the knights in the dark. I wanted that stamp collection frightfully (there

were several admirable Liberians with beasts and fruit on them; one or two were actually triangular) and I suborned Michael to come secretly with me, promising him my own collection of birds' eggs. I saw myself devoting my life to philately, becoming the world authority on Liberia; what did I want with birds' eggs any more? We crept across the grass and stood for a moment at the margin of the black wood to take a last look at the friendly lights of home. Then we started to stumble upwards through the darkness. I can still smell the cold damp of the dead leaves and lichened boughs; I can still feel the squelch of the wet ground as we blundered across the stretch of bog near the great clump of rhododendrons. At last we reached the little ridge that cut off the knights from Whern and was the outer bank of their private valley. The starlight filtered through the sparser trees. Vaguely looming, one of the statues showed the menace of its bulk. At that moment I distinctly heard a crashing in the undergrowth over in the shadow of the rising hill where stood the second knight. I read instantly the secret of the horrid pair—*after dark they came alive*. My nerves, already strung up, gave way. I turned and fled, clumsily dragging my bad foot down the dark hill, over the wide grass and safely to the stable yard. Half an hour later I met Michael in the passage.

"Funky little fool!" he said peevishly. "If you were going to bunk you might at least have left the rope for me to tie on!"

CHAPTER III

1.

It was three days after my return to London that I ran into my twin cousins near Burlington House. They were jolly kids with nice legs, but their parents were absurd.

"Hullo!" cried Jane. "Here's Uncle Dickie back!"

And they embraced me demonstratively. We proceeded along Piccadilly three abreast, Jane and Vera chattering like sparrows, while I basked in the quiet contentment of their youth and merriment.

"Scraps," I said solemnly. "Here is Stewart's. Slightly to your left and down the hill is Rumpelmayer's. Which?"

We exchanged family news. They were comically serious about the funeral.

"Mother is taking up eurhythmics," said Vera.

"Your mother is a very remarkable woman, my dear Vera," I replied, "but I wish she would take up things that conceal her figure. Arctic discovery, now, or developing photographs—plenty on and a poor light. But there you are. . . . People never do. Here am I, for instance, a learned bibliophile, wasting my afternoon on two little . . ."

"Try 'bits of fluff,' uncle."

I looked shocked.

"Really, Jane——"

"No, uncle dear, only pretence."

"Vile midgets," I cried. "Tell me about your brother."

"He is getting up a quarterly art paper—with two or three others. They think you'll subscribe."

I groaned.

"Another quarterly! Called 'Watersheds,' I suppose, or the 'Iguanodon.' Subscribe! That young man will get into Monica's clutches if he's not careful."

The twins clapped their hands and shouted:

"He's in them already," in piercing unison.

"Perfidious minuscula," I said severely, "why have you hidden this? From brother to sisters. The tentacles of my sister's set will seize your little bodies next and suck your warm and eager blood. Jane will write villanelles about ham and Vera will lecture on Egyptian tombs."

The twins laughed gleefully.

"Old croaker, to talk like that of your sister!"

"You are too young to know that Art to-day has lost her head. *Ars est celare tartem*, as the scholars say. I am old and grey with the sins of others, and I know. Wherefore I forbid you to turn your minds from chocolates and lingerie to culture and cubist furniture. You wouldn't like to be cut out of my will, would you?"

The foolish darlings looked quite sad, as though I had foretold my early death. Their joyous freshness, its credulity and pertness, filled me with a ludicrous, protective yearning. I seemed to see

them drawn by invisible threads towards Monica's faked but lurid blaze, to see their candour melting like candle-wax, their heedless ardour becoming merely one more tongue of painted flame in that furnace of artifice and flippancy. The next moment I was paying the bill, and (by request) admiring the twins' new shoes.

2.

After a solitary dinner at the club I went round to Portman Square. Michael had just arrived from Whern. He was in evening clothes, and received me with a wave of the hand. I watched him striding nervously up and down the long drawing-room, his upright slimness darkening one after another of the tall mirrors between the windows.

"Monica here?" I asked at last.

He shook his head and stopped at the far end of the room, gazing at me abstractedly, his thin lips pursed. Then with an obvious effort:

"Dick," he said, "there'll be trouble at Whern."

I raised enquiring brows. Michael went on, speaking rather fast. I had not formerly seen him so near emotion.

"He's mad and obstinate! I tried every means —persuasion, entreaties. He'll have the place by the ears. Seemed to resent my interference. Had the insolence to try the elder brother touch on *me*—on *me!* Harold! I wish the devil——"

"You were 'it,' dear Michael," I put in. "Well—it might have been better. But you are not. Nor I, thank God. But—if I may suggest—it

was perhaps hardly tactful to lecture Harold—er—so near the beginning of his reign, was it ?"

Michael sniffed.

" Family honour is not a matter for tact or compromise. The name is mine as much as his. I will not have it lowered."

" But what's happened ?" I asked. " What's all the fuss about ?"

Thus challenged, Michael was unsatisfactory. Nothing had happened; merely the tone of the thing was wrong: the servants were uneasy—or rather some of them were; the new master lounged in bed till midday; demanded whiskies at one a.m.; let the dogs sprawl on the chintzes of the drawing-room; drove the small Renault along the grass paths of the rose garden to see if she'd take the corners cleanly. Poor Michael ! I could understand the disgust in his tidy soul. But at the same time, I sympathised with Harold's resentment at reproof; Michael was so irritating in his corrective mood.

" I hope you are over-pessimistic," I said at last. " Things will settle down. They must be different to the old days (good luck to them in that), and old servants are easily shocked. I shall believe something is really wrong when Studland invades town to tell us so."

Michael turned away impatiently.

" You are never serious," he said shortly.

At that moment the door-bell pealed noisily. From below on the steps we could hear laughter and talking. Michael listened a moment.

"Monica!" he said angrily. "With the usual crowd! You shall have the privilege of welcoming them."

And he hurried from the room.

I sat and listened to the servant's steps along the hall. The latch clicked, and the babble of voices lost its muted fringe and became, in the echoing confinement of the hall, hard-edged and strident. I heard Monica shout to the man:

"Anyone in?"

Then, in reply to inaudible information:

"Bring something to drink and the cigars to the drawing-room."

I made no move. The door swung open and Monica appeared, followed by another girl and three young men. She wore a tight dress of silver mail that flashed and wriggled as she moved; a black turban with a steel-blue plume half covered her red-gold hair. Her companions were varied. The girl I knew to be Sally Presteign, a sallow, secretive creature with a sudden, hiccoughy laugh that startled as would a yodel from an undertaker. Of the men two were in evening clothes, and doubtless in the daytime wore cloth-topped boots and braided, short black coats; their dress waistcoats were grey, and they had velvet lapels to their dinner jackets. The third man protruded a swarthy face and a head of long black hair from a dark blue flannel shirt; on his feet were sand-shoes.

Monica was not one for introductions.

"You might have the manners to stand up when ladies come into the room," she remarked.

"I might," I agreed.

"Take pews, you," she told her friends. "Where are the cigarettes?" Finding them on the piano, she threw the box to Sally Presteign. It knocked the chair arm and scattered its contents on the floor.

"Damn!" said Monica. "Leave them"—as the fattest grey waistcoat creaked towards the floor—"they'll clear them up. Dick—give Sally a fag."

I obeyed, skimming my case along the carpet to the visitor's none too dainty feet.

"Mr. Moffat," went on Monica, with that tight graciousness she always used when speaking to her artistic protégés, "is going to run a paper for me. We want fifty pounds from you, brother Richard. And another from Michael. Where is he?"

I pointed to the ceiling.

"As a shareholder I should like details of this scheme. What kind of a paper? And is it the same as Walter's? Because, if so, I've already told the twins I shall boycott it ruthlessly."

"It's my show, not Walter's," replied Monica tartly; "and, anyway, you and your old boycott . . . ! As for details, the editor will supply."

Moffat blinked at me behind his pince-nez and began in a voice low with intensity:

"Miss Braden feels that there should be some platform from which the—er—rebels in art can state their case. The established journals are hide-bound with academic prejudice, tied hand and foot to advertisers, ignorant of the *new* in literature and art, dazzled by popular success.

Miss Braden most generously proposes to find the money for a quarterly review which shall provide this needed rostrum, and wants me to—er—sort of edit it. . . ."

He ended tamely, and cast a look at Monica for encouragement. But she only lay back in her chair, with half-shut eyes, and blew smoke-rings at the ceiling. I felt sorry for the shaggy man and coughed helpfully. He resumed, less intensely, and more nervously than before.

"We hope before very long to pay our way and—er—with good-fortune and merit—even to make some profit. But it is not likely that there will be anything in the nature of a—er—dividend —er—for some years. We are anxious to avoid the snare of advertisement and cadging. We wish to keep our hands free, our policy unpledged. We wish——"

Monica interrupted with sudden brutality.

"Got it now, Dick? Send me a cheque, there's a good boy. You shall have a copy of each number for nothing. I'm going to publish all my poems, and Sally has written a looking-glass version of the Roi Pausole. Damn funny."

Miss Presteign screeched and was silent. As she never moved, one had the impression that the noise came out of the top of her head and was released by sudden pressure of her tongue on a button in the roof of her mouth.

"Are there to be any contributors besides you and Miss Presteign?" I asked. "There must be a few more rebels left."

Monica smiled lazily. Moffat ventured:

"I thought, Miss Braden, it would be wise to secure some permanent contributors, and I have a list——"

An explosion of laughter from the men in grey waistcoats, who had been whispering together for several minutes, brought Moffat up in mid-speech. He looked ingratiatingly towards the interruption, afraid the mockery was for him.

"What's the joke, Waggles?" asked Monica.

With a glance at me the man addressed (he was the more repulsive of the two, lean, with a dark, Jewish face shaved blue to his cheek-bones) crossed the room and whispered in my sister's ear. The communication was clearly entertaining, for Monica's features kindled one by one to merriment. At the end she laughed with artificial embarrassment and waved him away.

"Really, Waggles. You *are* the limit. Tell Sally. But I think it's a bit steep that one, don't you, Fellowes?"

The fat grey waistcoat heaved with sympathetic humour. Rubbing his pale, thick hands down his black, thick thighs, Fellowes nodded conspiratorially and observed hoarsely:

"He's a one for 'em is Waggles."

Moffat was forgotten. He sat crouched and deserted in his chair, a forlorn reminder that once long, long ago the ghost of an idea had flitted across this bestial scene. The sight of him broke the last shell of my aloofness. I got up and limped towards the door.

"Are you coming?" I said as I passed.

He shuffled eagerly to his feet and ran after me from the room.

A short way down the street he turned on me suddenly.

"Damn you!" he said with a hoarse violence that was as ludicrous as it was startling. "Damn all of you—with your wealth, and your assurance, and your cursed levity! You dare to talk of helping art and artists, when you want only another fillip to your boredom. Lechers, you are, lechers in mind and body. I wish—I wish——"

He sputtered into silence. I glanced at his working face, heard his stick beating a ragged tune on the pavement. The interval of quiet seemed interminable; then gradually the noise of traffic crept round the corner of consciousness once more; a hurrying servant-girl tapped by on the opposite side of the street. Once more I looked at him. He was mumbling inaudibly and staring at his absurd shoes. The situation was embarrassing. I wanted to hear more of this volcanic under-Moffat, but felt myself not well placed for saying so. I found a card in my pocket.

"That's my address," I said. "Come and see me on Wednesday evening. You're right in one way, but you're wrong in a hell of a lot of others."

And I left him screwing his features with short sight and puzzlement over the visiting-card.

A short detour brought me round again to Portman Square. Before going to my rooms I felt I must have this out with Monica. I let myself in and stood in the hall listening. The pile of coats, hats, and sticks showed the visitors

had not departed. A crash of glass and loud laughter from the drawing-room decided me. As I reached the first-floor landing, I saw Michael half-way down the next flight of stairs. He beckoned me to him.

" I'm going to clear the lot out," he said. " You must support me."

I nodded. As we opened the drawing-room door one of the men toppled backwards off the sofa, and a spirt of liquid patterned the grey carpet. Shrill applause from Monica and Miss Presteign showed that the catastrophe was someone's victory. I gathered from the foolish position and still more foolish expression of the other man that the game was a form of cock-fighting.

Michael watched the vanquished rooster scramble to his feet, and, his empty glass in one hand, adjust his crumpled shirt-front and waistcoat. He giggled as he took in the newcomers. Michael continued to watch him in contemptuous silence. Monica shouted for a fresh contest.

" Come on ! Have one more. You're two all now. A fiver on the winner !"

But the combatants hung back—they disliked Michael's eye; their efforts to appear at ease became more and more infantile. Realising the cause of their hesitation, Monica got up and lounged to the mantelpiece.

" What's the matter, Michael ? Are we keeping you awake ?"

He took no notice but, by continuing his arrogant survey of first one and then the other stranger, intensified their discomfort. Monica knew she

was beaten. The spirit was gone from her confederates; even Miss Presteign showed signs of restiveness. But she meant to carry the loss proudly. As though Michael and I were not in the room, she joined the small group near the sofa end and stretched her gleaming limbs.

"I'm sleepy," she announced. "Better toddle off now, children. See you to-morrow, Sally? Oh yes, lunch at Grimwood's; I remember."

Glad to cover their retreat with her nonchalance, the visitors left the room and were on the landing before they remembered there should be a servant to show them out and some mechanical preparation for their homeward journey. Monica saw she had been too hasty and returned to the drawing-room to ring the bell. There was no sign of embarrassment in her walk as she crossed the room to do so, but the awkwardness of the huddled visitors on the landing was a treat. In reply to the bell the man came upstairs, with discreet surprise edged his way round the obstructing figures, and stood respectfully at the door awaiting instructions. Before Monica could speak, Michael cut in:

"Show those people out, Hughes."

And, as the man disappeared, he closed the door.

I admired Michael's skill. He had got rid of the intruders and imprisoned Monica without addressing a word to any one of them. When the front door had thudded the finis to their visit, he turned with a sneer to our sister.

"Very pretty, Monica. Do you think this is a night club? Be kind enough in future to enjoy your scavengings in their native dustbins."

Monica was almost too angry to speak.

"I've as much right——" she began.

"Your rights fatigue me. This is Harold's house, not yours; and in his absence I give orders. Please understand once for all that I will not have those people here, nor any others like them."

She lost her temper and stormed at him, growing less dignified every minute. At the most passionate moment of her abuse Michael coolly turned his back and left the room. She stared at the closing door and stammered the few words of fury necessary to complete the rhythm of her sentence. Then, remembering that she also was a stylist in manners, she throttled down her bitterness. I always remember the mastery of that instantaneous transformation.

"What did you think of little Moffat?" she asked amiably. It was as though in mid-thunderstorm lightning had turned to flickering sunshine. It was not in my heart to open a fresh dispute.

"I hope to see more of him," I replied. "He seems the kind of person who might prove unexpected. Have you seen my pipe lying about? I think I must have left it."

We searched without diligence—I because I knew the pipe was in my pocket, Monica because she sought merely some cover for the completion of her self-control.

I yawned.

"No good," I said. "Must have left it somewhere else. Good-night."

"Good-night, Dick," she answered easily.

CHAPTER IV

1.

In those days I spent my time as unofficial helper in the department of Printed Books at the Museum. When I was at college I conceived an enthusiasm for bibliography, and was able in the years that followed my going down, by the good fortune of my circumstances, to give that enthusiasm an adequate backing of knowledge. Forrester found me useful as an extra hand, and I had no taste for hectic idleness. Hence my establishment, a year before my father's death, in two rooms in Fitzroy Square, great soaring rooms with windows like poised swans and delicate mouldings in plaster low relief. Michael preferred Portman Square, where he had his own suite and could study the political chessboard in dignified seclusion, but the blend of ceremony and disorder which pervaded the family house bothered me, and I made proximity to the Museum an excuse for clinging to my separate home.

I was wearily staring at the fire one evening shortly before Christmas and wondering whether there was to be a family gathering at Whern, and, if not, to whom I should propose myself as guest, when the telephone shrilled an unexpected promise of solution. Michael, at the other end of the line, sounded tense and irritated; his voice snapped, as

though one after another the strings of his self-control were breaking. He was coming round at once now that he knew I was at home. As I waited I felt the soothing magic of the room begin to work. It always seemed to come to my help at moments of anxiety. Five minutes before I had been tired and restless for no reason; now something had happened, and I felt cool and level-minded. Above the warm mosaic of my books the dull gold walls rose into shadow; the firelight leapt from point to point, kindling to intricate life or transforming into a winking series of ghost-grey gleams my carved and polished or austere and bleached oak furniture. Outside, the square lay dead under a black frost. There was no traffic, and only an occasional pedestrian, but I could hear, fluttering about the darkness, the uneasy whisperings of winter-London, a barely audible rustle of brittle fragments of sound, such as would be made by innumerable tiny splinters of glass swirled to and fro in the grip of a noiseless wind. Listening to the breath of London had been, ever since I settled there, a fondness of mine, and I was by now able to distinguish faint differences between the air-voices of summer and winter, of damp and drought, of clear and foggy nights. On this particular evening I gave special attention to the city's breathing, because this blight of frost was still somewhat unfamiliar to me, and I felt all the eagerness of the student discovering a new field for investigation. So engrossed was I that it annoyed me to hear a car purr round the corner

and stop below my windows. Quick steps crossed the pavement and the bell rang sharply. Groping my way downwards to the door, I wondered why Michael was not alone. On the doorstep, a little behind my brother, I recognised Studland, bowed and shivering, but even in these unusual circumstances vaguely a gesture of dignified respect. We went upstairs in silence. Studland awaited permission to remove his coat and seat himself. I got my visitors drinks and tobacco. Michael took up his favourite position on the hearthrug, hands in pockets, a smoking-coat buttoned tightly over his evening shirt. He was excited and spoke with sneering abruptness.

"You may remember, Dick, saying that you would believe things were wrong at Whern when Studland came to town to tell us so. Here he is. He's been sacked."

I turned an enquiring eye on the butler, who rubbed one hand along his thigh in an embarrassed way, while with the other he played with his traditional cravat.

"What have you been up to, Studland?"

Michael shook himself impatiently.

"Don't be funny, Dick. It's serious. Harold has sacked three-quarters of the staff—wages in lieu of notice—and is taking on a new lot. Studland came straight to Portman Square to see me. I have brought him here so that you will believe he has really come. I shall go to Whern next Monday, and you will come too. It is impossible for me to get away before."

I was too accustomed to Michael's methods to resent this autocratic phrasing, but I felt uncertain of the object of the proposed visit, and of our status in the matter.

"What do you mean to do, Michael?"

"Do! Why, find out what the reason for this is."

"I don't quite see where I come in."

Michael replied by bidding Studland repeat his narrative of events at Whern.

"Well, sir, it was a fortnight ago that the housekeeper told me something was afoot. One of the girls gave her sauce, and, in reply to reprimand, hinted that Mrs. Summers would not for long be in a position to find fault. Then a day or two later I had trouble of the kind with Dale. Then, again——"

The recital continued and reached its climax with the sudden dismissal of Studland, Mrs. Summers, and those of the house, stable, and garden staff who had been longest at Whern. When he finished the old man dropped his head on his hands and sat motionless. His world had turned upside down. Forty of his sixty years of life had been spent at Whern. He did not understand, and had come to London to see Michael as a child will come to someone it knows and trusts for explanation of the strange customs of an alien household.

Michael respected the poor man's bewilderment for a few moments. Then he said, gently enough:

"Thank you, Studland. That will do at present.

Go back in the car. I will walk. They will have a room ready for you at Portman Square."

I was solemn enough now, but felt no easier as to our descent on Whern. When the butler had gone:

"It's astounding," I said. "Studland! To be given the boot like that! What the hell is Harold after? But, Michael, it's damned awkward to interfere. He's master."

Michael tossed his head.

"If you funk it, you needn't come. But I'm going. Awkward or not, it's got to be done. If he imagines he can play old Harry with Whern just because he's the eldest. . . ."

I had an idea.

"Don't you think it might be wise to go down as though in the ordinary course? Why not for Christmas? Then we could look round and gauge the situation. I must confess that to dash down with a 'What's all this?' manner strikes me as devilish risky. It might put Harold's back up and lead to a thumping big row, whereas a little diplomacy now and . . . At least we shall be no differently placed for a row if one is necessary."

Michael was always fair-minded, and he listened attentively. His sense of injury was bitter and urged immediate action, but after a little argument he admitted that my plan was reasonable. We concocted a telegram announcing ourselves for the following Monday and to stop over the New Year. We agreed that it was fortunate that Monica and Anthony were otherwise engaged.

2.

Snow fell on the Sunday and it was to a white Wiltshire that we travelled through the leaden light of Monday afternoon. I half wondered if we should be met, and found myself for the first time looking anxiously for the car as the train jolted into Laylham. It was almost a relief to see one waiting in the road. I recognised the man who took our bags and, although the chauffeur was strange, he seemed an ordinary-looking fellow enough. The station-master greeted us effusively, and I thought the salutations of the two or three country people who got out of the local train a shade more emphatic than I had remembered to be usual. Michael made no sign, and I decided I was imagining differences where none existed.

We were cold, and sat in silence during the three-mile drive. The fields and hedges were white, and in the falling dusk it was impossible to take in any details of the woods or park as we passed through towards the house. The first serious reminder of the changed order was the appearance of the new butler, a rosy-faced, shifty-looking person with a fat, servile voice.

"His lordship is in the smoking-room. I was to inform you gentlemen that tea is awaiting you."

Harold greeted us cordially, drawing us to the fire, rattling the keys and money in his pockets, beaming geniality.

"Good of you fellows to come down. Keep up old customs, eh? If only this damned snow

would go, we might get some decent shootin'. Huntin's been impossible for a fortnight. Ground like iron."

He rattled on, while we had our tea and stretched cold limbs to the roaring fire. Was it a mare's-nest we had come out to find ?

" Where's Mary ?"

" She'll be down to dinner. Bit tired, I think. We have a few folks here, and it makes late hours."

" Who are the guests ?" asked Michael ominously.

Harold paused a moment.

" Don't know if you know 'em," he said. " Oh yes—you know Petersham and Molly Harter and Chris Speelman. They're here—and one or two others."

Michael did not reply, and I felt things were veering round once more to the significant.

The next incident strengthened this feeling. On my way to my room, I passed a housemaid who, instead of becoming merely part of the landing wall and fading impersonally away, gave me a distinct and provocative glance of a kind with which I have definite associations.

Finally—and I felt it almost a confirmation of my forebodings—came the following occurrence. My bedroom was unsatisfactory. There was a cigarette-end on the window-sill, no hot water, a black, smoky fire and a small tray with a used glass on it pushed into the corner behind the hanging cupboard. I rang the bell. It was answered by a maid in regulation cap and apron.

She looked at me with a faint challenge in her eyes.

"Where is the valet?"

"Me, sir," she answered pertly.

"What do you mean? Where is the man who is to look after my things?"

"I am to look after you, sir," she said, and her tone gave a new significance to the commonplace phrase.

"In that case," I said coldly, "would you be good enough to make this room decently tidy, to remove that tray, to bring me hot water, and to unpack those bags? I gave the keys to the butler."

The girl's manner lost its subtle familiarity and became sulky. She picked up the tray and disappeared. I wondered whether Michael was having a similar experience.

To give the girl time to finish her duty I decided to look up my sister and to sound her for fresh evidence of what was afoot. Mary was in her sitting-room, an exasperating place tucked under the battlements of the central tower, with small, traceried windows and an attic ceiling. But I had not been with her for five minutes before I was once more blaming myself for exaggerated fears. She talked quietly and cheerfully of normal things, and seemed not the least surprised that Michael and I had come to Whern. In a way it was mortifying. The dramatic planning of our journey, the rosy scoundrel of a butler, the incident of the housemaids, had encouraged me to think our appearance opportune. I was even prepared

to be greeted, if not as a deliverer, at least as a welcome reinforcement to the angels. Instead I was taken for granted and Mary was talking about dogs and tapestry and the need for varnishing two of the portraits in the great hall, as though the occasion were actually only one of a series of ordinary Christmas gatherings. I tried to draw her about Studland.

"He was getting old and ill," she said, "and Harold decided to pension him off. Summers went in a huff over some silly point of status. I still have Grantham, and you will find lots you know as you go round to-morrow."

My exultation drooped and drooped. I felt angry with Michael for the mountain he had conjured from the veriest molehill. Then I congratulated myself that the "diplomatic" method had at least saved us from open blundering. Mary talked on. She was coming to town about the middle of January; Alice Snaith was engaged to young Clifford; could Michael persuade Harold to make overtures to that odd creature Shrivenham? Mary was dying to see Dauntney. . . . We meet none of the *real* neighbours," she complained. "All Harold's friends are people from town."

"Time to dress," she said at last, and I went downstairs to find my room.

Everything was in order. My evening clothes were lying out; the fire glowed generously. I was half-dressed when a knock on the door announced a man-servant.

"Excuse me, sir, but I could find no dress ties among your things. In case you had forgotten them, I asked his lordship's permission to bring these few for your use."

I thanked him, and he withdrew. Had I dreamed the encounter with the girl? From feeling ashamed of my suspicions, I became uneasy as to my mental balance. Certainly the fellow was strange to me, but as certainly he had unpacked my bags and was now in attendance on my wants. I slipped along to Michael's old room and found him nearly dressed, humming one of those tight, well-corseted ditties of which he alone seemed to have the secret. He answered my leading questions with humorous astonishment. What did I mean by "noticed anything"? Of course his things had been unpacked. By a valet, he supposed. No, he had not noticed the butler's face particularly. Why should he? It appeared that even Michael was conspiring to make me seem a fool. Subtly he was now on the side of Whern and meeting with bland condescension the impertinent queries of an outsider. Much ruffled, I went down to dinner.

The guests were not my sort, but they behaved with perfect suitability. Harold's boisterousness and lounging manner were in no way more exaggerated than usual. The evening passed in bridge and billiards, while two or three practised songs for theatricals due for Christmas Eve. When I awoke next morning I was fiercely determined that all was well at Whern, that Michael had let me down, and that in future I was impervious to alarms.

3.

This deliberate obtuseness lasted a week. The weather remained snowy and cold. I saw little of the rest of the party, as I spent my time mainly in the long library examining a set of locked shelves in the gallery never accessible in my father's day, and now yielding to my eager eyes contents of considerable interest.

Then came New Year's Eve. It had snowed hard all day, and Harold, when he came down to dinner, was clearly far gone in whisky. At dinner Petersham swayed about in his seat and spilt claret on the table-cloth. During the savoury he challenged his neighbour to a balancing match on the back legs of their chairs. Inevitably both tipped over, and the company applauded the swirl of underclothes and the long silk leg that, in the lady's fall, traced an admirable curve backwards from the table edge. One of the guests boasted he could drop tumblers from a great height without breaking them. Harold suggested betting, and heavy stakes were made. The party adjourned to the clerestory of the octagon hall, and footmen carried upstairs dozens of tumblers. There followed an hour of uproar, shrieks of excitement, crashes of splintered glass, oaths and shouts of encouragement. Michael went up to Harold and said something in an undertone. There was an insolent reply, and, tightening his lips, Michael shrugged his shoulders and went to his room. Mary had long ago disappeared. I sat on the

settle by the drawing-room door and watched. When the game of tumblers palled there was an interval for drinks.

"A pyjama dance," suggested someone, and the revellers fled to their bedrooms to undress.

From my own room I heard the music and laughter till nearly one o'clock. Then silence sagged down upon Whern, and once more the soft mutter of the snowy wind crept about the mouldings of the great façade. I could not sleep. This wasteful rowdiness made me nervous and miserable. I had left my tobacco in the smoking-room and went to fetch it. From the last stair I flashed my torch along the marble hall. It was frosted and glittering with broken glass; most unsuitable walking for bedroom slippers. Mounting to the first floor I went towards the servants' quarters, meaning to take the service staircase and so approach the library from the other side. Suddenly a door opened ahead of me, and a beam of light shot across the corridor. I shrank into a recess. A woman in a heavy cloak hurried out, and the door closed behind her. But not before I had seen, stretched indolently across the bed, Harold, red-faced and seemingly sunk in sleep.

The next morning I told Michael that I was going back to town and that Mary was coming with me. Monica had gone abroad directly after Christmas; Anthony was in Leicestershire with friends. Michael asked no questions.

"All right," he said. "I'll follow in a day or two. I want to have a look at the property beyond Nicholas."

CHAPTER V

1.

In the train I prepared to evade questions. Mary had come away meekly enough, but I anticipated some demand for explanation. None came, and I began to feel neglected. The man of action should be saluted; the god, after he has alighted from his car, should receive some word of homage. My arrival at Whern had fallen flat, but I had mastered the event with energy and speed, and now deserved from the rescued one, if not respect, at least complaint.

"Sorry to rush you off, Polly," I began ingeniously.

Mary smiled at me pleasantly. It seemed my precipitance was forgiven. Her lack of perception was irritating. She must be made to realise why Whern was at present no place for her. I coughed.

"You see—things were going on. . . . I didn't like to feel you were alone. . . ."

"My good Dick, I know all about it. You talk as if you'd discovered something!"

I stared at her.

"You knew! Then why to goodness didn't you let me and Michael know?"

She tossed her head.

"And despise myself and be despised by both of you for doing it, I suppose?"

" I'm sorry," I said. " Apologies."

We sat in silence and the train swayed towards Paddington. I was ashamed of my lapse. Not so much did I regret the imputation on Mary of tale-bearing, but it worried me that I had not instinctively assumed the code of caste, and that it had been possible for me to imagine a sister of ours, from fear or unhappiness, betraying the wrongdoing of one brother to another. Nevertheless I was unconvinced by this projection of schoolboy honour into life, by the persistence—against common sense—of this conventional, stilted courage. No doubt the fault was mine—indicated some strain of commonness in me that preferred practical good sense to traditions of quality. But that begged the question, because tradition *was* good sense, and admitted no exceptions. Evidently I was tinged with a baser morality than that of my ancestors or of my contemporaries. The thought was mortifying, but at the same time mildly flattering. I daresay the Ugly Duckling secretly thought himself rather a fellow.

As the journey proceeded I reviewed with interest the varying circles to which my brothers and Monica belonged. I suppose I was in those days what they call a " superior " young man, because I habitually found amusement and instruction in analysis of the different categories of that minority of aristocrats—relatively so few in number but so great in influence—that was our world. But my recent excursion into caste-honour had extra-sharpened my critical wits.

Harold's taste was—not surprisingly, and maybe by compulsion—tending to the flash metropolitan. The local landowners fought shy of him, and he was driven to look for company among the members of that student plutocracy that, at certain seasons, descends riotously from London to splash blatancies about the resentful but helpless shires. From these invaders the real residents, whose occupations were horse and dog-breeding and a little farming, shrank in distaste and fear. The loose complacency of Mrs. Harter and her friends they might in some moods have enjoyed for its physical abandon. But its perverted mentality jarred their vague instincts of propriety. A few were sots and a few mere brutes, but in the main they were ordinary, healthy animals, who kept for London the indulgences of which they were at heart ashamed.

Very different were Michael's friends, both from the people Harold knew and from those he might have known. They included at once the cream and the intelligence of the aristocracy. By the " best families " (and in Michael's parlance that meant literally five or six, and not the ten thousand of Press chatter) my brother was regarded as one of the few hopes for the future, for he loved politics and understood them, but he loved breeding more. It was rare to find a young man of ancient English lineage who was neither dissolute nor touched with democracy. Michael was rigid for privilege, but he was ready to do his part honourably and with industry. One might say that he

believed at once in the divine right and the earthly duties of the aristocrat.

While the former of these two beliefs earned him the affection of the most exclusive, the latter, to which was allied efficiency and zeal, won him the respect and interest of the political intelligentsia of conservatism. He had been on the verge of Parliament for a year before my father died, and only the mass of his outside political engagements had held him back. He was not an intoxicating speaker, but his manner was clear and forceful, and his sincerity obvious. It is easy to understand that such talents were in great demand among a kindly and bewildered class of titled landowners, who resented and feared the attacks ever more fiercely made upon them, but had neither capacity nor knowledge to defend themselves.

In Monica's circle were to be found at once the prodigals of the great houses, the cleverest of the younger members of the new aristocracy, and the dabblers in art of the upper middle class. The intermixture of charlatan was frequent; Jews abounded. But then you cannot play Mæcenas at eight-and-twenty without cherishing a few charlatans, nor at any age without encountering innumerable Jews. I disliked Monica's friends, however exquisite their taste, for the sound of their voices and the smell of their pomade. But they were all good company, and, whatever their motives, helped new ideas to spread, because they had money to buy pictures and books, time to

spend at concerts and theatrical experiments, and superlatives to squander on any artistic freak.

My own friends were few then, as they are now, because I have always preferred animals to human beings. Besides, I was family peacemaker, continually on the fringe of quarrels, continually a confidant from one side or another. The position was no sinecure, but it allowed me to gauge my relations to my brothers and sisters. Harold despised me for a weakling, but he feared my tongue. Michael was gently scornful of my taste for compromise, my very half-hearted socialism, but he knew me for an ally of order and decency, and recognised my value as a go-between. Monica liked me because she knew that I liked her, and because I laughed at her jokes. We both had a real love for beauty, and, I think, throve on mutual criticism. But there were times when I hated her for vulgar cruelty and she me for officious acidity. Anthony had not at this period won access to the family lists; he was treated as a junior, and it was something of a chance that such mistaken treatment did not lead to actual disaster. As for Mary, she and I were fast friends, for all that she would scold me sometimes as supercilious and reactionary, while I, amusedly mindful that I was myself regarded by Michael as playing with anarchy, would lecture her severely on the dangerous trend of her extremism. Later we drifted apart; the reader shall judge whose was the fault.

At this point I recalled with a start how oddly positions had been reversed in our conversation

of a little while ago. Then it was she who had flown the colours of the old regime. I looked at her sitting opposite. As she read, she pursed her fine, thin lips something as Michael did, the lower lip drawn inwards against the teeth. Her face was small, with straight, fair eyebrows and a creamy skin. She had none of Monica's vivid colouring and her normal manner was diffident and shy. But there was temper in her rather long, sharp nose, and in the tense quietness of her attitude. She was featured like Michael and Anthony—finely, too finely. Harold was heavy-faced and would be an unpleasant dotard. Monica and I had open foreheads and wide, easy eyes, but the treacherous sensuality of the Bradens was stamped on our lips. She had the luck of recklessness and I was a cripple, so we might have survived our heritage, the one flinging over the chasm, the other limping sardonically to its brim. But there were other pitfalls, pitfalls we could not have foreseen.

2.

It was not that I had regarded Harold as a thing of no will, or that I had consciously taken his blustering habit for an impatient cloak for indolence, but I was frankly surprised at his written demand that Mary should return home. It came three weeks after her sudden flight to town and was all the more unexpected in that Michael, who left Whern some days later than we did, described Harold as unmoved by the sudden departure of his sister.

"She is wanted here," he wrote; "and I shall appreciate your seeing that she leaves London on Friday morning. The car will meet her at Laylham."

Michael, with that infuriating obtuseness that so often characterised his handling of other folks' affairs, read this aloud at breakfast at Portman Square. Mary told me afterwards she nearly shook him for the owlish interrogation of his glance across the litter of toast and fruit and opened envelopes. There was a servant in the room at the moment and, when he had disappeared, Mary asked angrily why Michael must read personal letters aloud for anyone to hear. Then she snatched Harold's note and brought it round to the Museum for me to see. I rang Michael up.

"This letter of Harold's," I said. "What are you going to do?"

"Do? Nothing. What's the excitement?"

"She can't go back there."

"Why not?"

"Good God, Michael, you don't suggest, after going off like that——"

"Like what?"

I began to realise he knew nothing of the reason for Mary's departure, that he had noticed nothing at Whern but a tendency to rowdiness and destruction of property, that he might regard Mary's return as some small security for better behaviour, and therefore desirable. I had not discussed the matter with him because we had hardly met. What a damned, high-thinking, simple-minded dunderhead!

"Are you in to lunch?" I asked.

"I am."

"All right. I'll come home." And rang off.

The explanation was a little funny. Mary tore Harold's letter into bits, and was comically dramatic in her refusal to obey or even to reply to it. Michael was puzzled, and then bored, and finally incredulous. He sent Mary out of the room and demanded details. I gave them. He shook a bewildered head. The whole thing was incomprehensible to him. It was as though he had been suddenly informed that titles no longer existed. Gradually, however, he saw that I was serious. With the realisation of what such behaviour might mean to Braden, he froze into one of his cold, contemptuous rages. He apologised with grave formality to Mary for his breakfast indiscretion, pledged himself to support her against Harold, and then proceeded to write out the following telegram:

"WHERN, WHERN ROYAL.

"Go to hell.—BRADEN."

I was reading over his shoulder, hardly believing my eyes.

"But, Michael——"

He raised a pale, interrogating glance; the interruption annoyed him.

"It'll be all over the place! All the tenants will hear, and the servants! You know what a gossip Mrs. Rundle is."

"I am not afraid of the tenants," he sneered. "Not even of the servants."

I pleaded with him. For all our sakes it must not be heralded abroad that Braden was divided

against itself. A letter, at least, would be discreet. Perhaps with diplomacy Harold might be persuaded to change his mind. But Michael was touched in his tenderest spot. He had heard the call of outraged breeding, and others might count the cost. It was only when I argued that a carefully worded and sealed refusal might wound Harold more that he began to listen to reason. He prided himself on the writing of elaborately sarcastic letters. The opportunity was unique. At last he tore up his telegram and consented to use the post, but of conciliation or circumlocution he would hear nothing.

"Incidentally," he said, as I was leaving the room, "I now understand an interruption the night before last at Bristol. I won't repeat it to you, but it invited me to look nearer home for certain excesses more commonly met with among the vulgar."

That afternoon I had little mind for anything but the coming breach. Michael could be trusted to make Harold writhe. To be insulted and shamed at a public meeting would be gall indeed, and it was in the first smart of understanding that he was writing his fatal letter. I felt I should hold my breath for three days.

Nevertheless the time crept by and nothing happened. I began to wonder if the letter had arrived. But even if it had not, Mary's failure to appear on the appointed Friday would have produced some result. Then one evening in the club I heard two new members talking. One had a book he was apparently recommending:

"First-rate statement of the case."

"Who's the fellow? Oh—Michael Braden. Isn't he the brother of the chap who keeps a disorderly house in Wiltshire?"

"I don't understand. Braden's brother is Whern."

"Yes—that's the name. Haven't you heard about it? Good Lord, another Medmenham——"

And they moved away.

I sat and thought. They were club gossip now, Harold's debaucheries. The scandal had soon spread beyond the family. I felt a violent hatred of Harold tighten the fibres of my brain. That he should be able so to desecrate Whern and her loveliness and our good names! In more brutal days we should organise a troop of bullies and do him in. I went home to bed but could not sleep for the misery that, the more bitter for its tardiness, now poisoned my habitual nonchalance of thought.

It was barely light when my telephone rang. Michael—his voice always impersonal, sounded quite dehumanised across the wire—bade me come round at once. "Harold is here," he added. Through the deserted streets I dragged my useless foot. How different the grey was from that of twilight! The lamps were burning, but instead of conspiring with the darkness to give it richness and secrecy, they strove with dull resentment against the fumblings of dawn. The thousand lovers, who had trembled homeward through the dusk to ecstasy, were now turning uneasily in their sleep of weariness and shivering under the thin veil of their dreams.

When at last I let myself in at Portman Square I was tired and nervous. There was to be a quarrel, and Harold had come to bluster and to threaten us. More than ever I loathed him for his betrayal of our honour. I went straight to Michael's study. A fire was roaring behind the draught-screen, and, from between the bars, an uncertain light coloured the lower stratum of the air. Higher, and above the level of the grate, there was only black greyness, as through the uncurtained windows the paling sky looked in with night-filled eyes. I closed the door behind me and took in the figures of my two brothers. Harold, wrapped in a dark coat, sprawled in an easy-chair; Michael, in trousers and a dressing-gown, stood at the mantelpiece. There was a moment's silence.

"What a curious hour, Harold!" I began easily. "Did you motor?"

"Yes."

He answered with a touch of eagerness, as though my ordinary enquiry came as a relief.

"Yes," he repeated, "I motored. The car has gone round to the mews."

"Beastly cold, I should think," I said.

"Rotten." And he shivered noisily.

Michael made a slight jerking movement. To prevent him speaking I crossed the room towards the fire.

"Let's have the shutter up. It's caught now."

As I threw back the slide, the bright light splashed like a sudden wave up the bulk of Harold's muffled body and broke upon his face. It was

pale and sullen, and a pipe drooped from the corner of his mouth. I turned once more to the dancing flames and held out my cold hands. I was thinking hard and decided to forestall Michael in bringing the assembly to business.

"I suppose," I said, looking into the fire and enjoying the unstable brilliance that leapt and sank again and leapt not quite so high a second time, "that Harold has come about Mary. I am sorry I have had to keep you waiting and have missed the early conversation. Might I hear briefly what has happened?"

"Mary must come home," replied Harold quietly. "I want her."

"How—want her?"

"As hostess, of course, you fool."

I ignored the rudeness and went on as calmly as I could.

"Come, Harold. There's something more."

"Well, if there is, you won't get it," he said with a short laugh. "It's enough that I say she is to come. You forget she is not twenty-one for two years yet. Time enough for heroics after that."

I was silent, and Michael broke in with his studied drawl:

"The point is—now that you have finished your little conversation about the weather—that Harold has come to command. I have already refused to obey. What do you say?"

"I refuse also," I said in a low voice.

Harold struggled from the depths of his chair and came towards us. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Michael's feet nervously taut against

the curb. They never moved. I remained on my knees, my face towards the fire. I could hear Harold's heavy coat swing sulkily as he walked. He stopped a yard behind me.

"Rebellion, eh?" he asked. "You realise there is such a thing as crushing a rebellion? As could crush your miserable skulls if I wanted to!" he added ferociously.

"Don't lose your temper, Harold. I'm not frightened of you, nor likely to be. Better spare the effort."

I heard Harold turn and stride away down the room. I hobbled on my knees to a pouf at the side of the fireplace and faced the room. The light was getting stronger. Tall bookshelves alternated with spaces of pale wall. Harold's angry bulk swayed slowly to the far window, heaved round, and moved menacingly forward once again. When he spoke, I knew that Michael's contempt had pricked the bubble of his violence.

"All right, then. You challenge me to carry little Mary off. But I shan't do that. You're welcome to the ——. You won't, however, expect to receive any further subsidy from Whern, will you?"

I almost laughed with surprise. He was cutting us off with a shilling! I wanted to ask whose idea it was. Michael shrugged.

"Your harem will welcome the extra cash. You will, of course, bear the entail in mind. As for Mary, the last word has been said."

Harold was searching for his gloves in the depths of the armchair. Without a word, having but-

toned his coat, he drew them on and pulled a cap over his eyes.

"You'll miss all this," he said carelessly, motioning with his hand to the long, luxurious room.

"Shall I?" asked Michael.

"—because," went on Harold, as though no one had interrupted, "I am selling this house in four hours' time—with immediate possession. The buyer will expect all the furniture and objects that do not belong to me, and therefore not to him, to be cleared out within one week. I hope you will find comfortable quarters. So long!"

And he went out, shutting the door noisily behind him.

I looked at Michael. He was staring at the closed door, motionless and pale. At last he turned to me and raised his eyebrows.

"On the whole, I think Harold has won," I said. "How much have you to live on? I think I have about two hundred pounds a year."

Michael shook himself impatiently.

"Oh, *that!* I can go to a dozen places. But the damned insolence——"

"The rights of property must be kept inviolate, Michael," I quoted unkindly. "We are experiencing for once the joys of the under dog. Our landlord has turned us out, and we have no remedy. Our wages are suddenly cut off—and again we have no remedy. Rotten, isn't it?"

He turned his back on me, and stood biting his fingers and gazing at the fire. I heard a servant stirring on the drawing-room floor below and went in search of her or him and food.

CHAPTER VI

1.

It was strange how little immediate outward difference to our lives was caused by Harold's drastic punishment. Certainly appearances were not kept up without an effort, and the process was, to my thinking, the most distasteful feature of the new life. But Michael insisted. He pointed out that real damage might be done to the cause of aristocracy (and incidentally to his own political prospects) by a public scandal. He virtually forbade me to leave Fitzroy Square, although I had reconciled myself to a hunt for lodgings in Highgate or Westbourne Park or Battersea.

"Bloomsbury, or whatever it is," he said, "is bad enough, but then people know you are a freak; it's a fine old house, and your neighbourhood is so fantastic that only deliberate choice can explain your being there. But rooms at thirty shillings a week! They would be plain necessity, and necessity cannot drive a Braden."

I explained I could hardly continue to pay £100 a year on rent alone out of an income of £250.

"I'll arrange," said Michael. . . . "Tell me when you get into difficulties."

He transferred his own belongings to an elegant

flat in Queen Anne's Mansions. It later transpired that the flat belonged to a wealthy manufacturer in the Midlands, who desired social advancement and the survival of the existing order. At a political dinner he had heard Michael say that "we" had sold our house in Portman Square. The transaction was apparently a relief, in that it set the speaker free to find a quieter and more central place in which to work. The manufacturer drew Michael aside. He would be greatly honoured. . . .

Acceptance of such a favour from commerce may seem inconsistent, but it was logical enough. Whatever makes life easier for the ruling class is justifiable and natural; the duty of the rest is to help. To make a fetish of independence and to distrust charity is characteristic of the erstwhile slave. Aristocracy has the same right to gifts from inferiors as have victorious kings to tribute from their vassals.

I am doubtful whether, had not Harold chosen to remain invisible at Whern and but for the chance that Monica was out of England, we should have succeeded in keeping all hint of scandal from the papers. Anthony's absence was convenient, if less essential. He was manageable. There was no danger from Mary. She was in the secret and not likely to feel anxious to divulge it. She declared a sudden intention of going to college, and the trustees of her small private income (like the rest of us, she had inherited a little money from our mother) raised no objection. Also, we had

singularly few relations, and my father was not the kind of man to have made many friends, so that the kindly peering of an older generation was not greatly to be feared. Thus, assisted by fortune, we acted with promptitude and discretion. People wondered, a few talked, but the one or two outsiders who knew the truth (the bank manager, for instance, and Mary's trustees) held their tongues.

With Monica on the spot, however, things would have been more difficult to manage. She was herself quick-tempered and careless-tongued; her friends were amateurs of indiscretion. So palatable a piece of gossip as the degradation of Whern and the forcible abduction of a sister would have been irresistible. Fortunately, her absence facilitated falsehood. After consulting Michael, I wrote to her describing some alarming discoveries made during an overhauling of the family finances. Numerous investments had proved unsound; heavy repairs to Whern were necessary. I explained the selling of Portman Square as an immediate means of raising money. Although, so far as we knew, Harold would continue to pay her and Anthony's allowances (they were not involved in the quarrel), it seemed wise to be prepared for disaster, and I therefore hinted that the estate might find itself so embarrassed that allowances would have to be reduced or temporarily suspended. It was a good letter, full of the most beautiful lies. Monica's reply deserves reproduction here:

"DEAR DICK,

"I hope to God you haven't gone and sold my Bouchers with P. Square. There are four, and an album of naughty French moderns. I couldn't *bear* to lose them. What have you done with my clothes? It's monstrous to start selling everything you can lay your hands on as soon as my back is turned. I wonder you didn't raise money on my hair and wire for it to be cut off and sent by registered post. It's a rare colour, and must be worth several pounds.

"Tell Harold he'd better *try* monkeying about with my allowance! I haven't the least intention of economising. Anyway, in order to be on the safe side, I've blushingly affianced myself to a Hungarian. Frightfully rich. I can't spell his name or I'd tell it you. I call him Putzi. We move to Cap Martin on Tuesday.

"Yours,
"M."

Michael's face, as he read this production, was a masterpiece of bewildered disgust. He handed the letter back with a sniff of contempt.

"Putzi——!" he said.

2.

The weeks passed, and April blustered into London. Existence began to seem cramped and unreal. I had never lived extravagantly, but I missed my valet and a motor when I needed it, and the thousand costly trifles that I had assumed

to be necessaries. Even as it was, and after only a month, I was badly overdrawn at the bank. But most of all did the breach with Whern bother me. I felt a longing for the restless sighing of the untidy woods, for the skirl of wings over the rich purple ploughland, for the bunched stiffness of the ilex groves, whose evergreen was at no time more sombre than at this eleventh hour of winter. My desire for Whern became so intolerable that I could no longer sit at home in the evenings, and formed the habit of going to some music-hall, concert, or picture-house. Theatres proper I avoided. They would mean awkward encounters, and, though I was a poor man now, I had the stall-habit and preferred not to go, rather than to stand for the pit or to intrude on the small romances of the upper circle. The darkness and anonymity of the cinema soothed my nervousness. I enjoyed the subdued murmur of talk, the darting flash of the electric torches, the combination of visible and soundless screen action, and invisible but highly audible orchestra, the sudden and fugitive friendships made with attractive neighbours. Ever more frequently was I tempted to the entertainments of the class to which I now belonged. One night, out of curiosity, I went to a large and sumptuous picture theatre recently opened near Golden Square. I preferred the simple hall with sloped seats, and this ornate misapplication to film plays of the conventional theatre structure—circle and boxes and proscenium arch—irritated me by its slavish snobbery. Before the " feature "

began the lights went up, and there was much passing in and out. Glancing critically at the frescoed ceiling and at the decorative orgy of gilded knobs and scrolls—then as now the ideal of people who prefer the word "luxury" translated into French—I saw Michael in a box. He was leaning back in his chair so that his face was an attenuated cameo against the darkness of the inner wall. Between him and the screen, and turned towards me as she gazed about the house, was a young woman in a dark red evening dress. She was a stranger to me, although her face was vaguely familiar. I noticed her glowing colour and the copper lights in her dark hair. Michael spoke to her, and she turned to answer him. The lights began to fade, and, as one by one the glimmering reflections of the gilded theatre sank into blackness, I watched her neck and shoulders harden from warm cream to dusky white.

In the foyer after the performance I came face to face with Michael. I had forgotten his presence, and looked round for his companion. As she came forward:

"Lady Dawlish," he said, "may I introduce my brother Richard?"

She was now muffled in a huge sable coat, and I saw diamonds sparkling here and there in the fiery shadows of her hair.

"How did you persuade Michael to anything so frivolous as the movies?" I asked.

She laughed gaily at my brother, who smiled with evident delight.

" I return the compliment, Dick. I didn't know you ever sank to any place of entertainment. He is a serious young man," he told Lady Dawlish, " and finds relaxation in collating incunabula."

We had reached the door, and I saw a covered car standing at the curb.

" Come and have some supper," said Michael.

" I am sure Lady Dawlish will forgive me," I said, " but in these clothes I can hardly. . . ."

Michael would have gone to Covent Garden in pyjamas had circumstances made it essential. He was above fashion, and would explain that he wore evening dress at night because it was comfortable. His tone suggested that he had invented it. But I was less assured, and Lady Dawlish must have seen it in my eye.

" Let us go home," she said, " and then Mr. Braden will come with us. Besides, the Savoy is so noisy and hot."

She entered the car and I followed. Michael gave an instruction to the chauffeur and closed the door after him. As we nosed our way through the midnight mart of Piccadilly, Michael talked with an almost foolish inconsequence. His usual cold precision had vanished into gay excitement; it was like seeing a proud and slender candle guttering into a fantastic lump of wax. I welcomed his garrulity, as it gave me time to collect my thoughts.

So this was Barbara Dawlish. As soon as I heard her name I realised why I had, so to speak, a black-and-white knowledge of her face. Sold at

seventeen by an avaricious father to old Sir Meredith Dawlish, she had earned her widowing by eight years' unhappiness. Under the will, she enjoyed the Dawlish fortune until she chose to marry a second time. The illustrated papers, at the time of the old man's death, were full of her portrait, of insolent sympathy and sycophant admiration. I tried in vain to remember having heard Michael speak of her. Yet he now seemed intimate and in an exalted state of mind that could have only one explanation. The affair was interesting.

She was certainly very beautiful. When we were in her drawing-room and she had thrown off her cloak I should have been content to sit and watch her slow, rich movements and the reluctant melancholy of her smile. At first sight she had seemed southern in her warm colouring, but I could now see that she had a fair English skin and grey eyes. The dark glow of her came from within, so that her face was a window through which shone steadily the light of her passionate patience. As she talked and laughed I noticed that her hand would every now and again fall listlessly by her side, and hang like a wilted flower against the dark red of her gown.

All the time Michael was devouring her with his eyes. In his absorption he was more than distinguished; he became extremely handsome. I found myself comparing them and their respective nobilities. Her deep-breasted graciousness and his lean arrogance. . . . She was at once the

mother and the queen, generous in sympathy, imperious in anger. He had the pathos of the lonely despot, pale, unyielding, the fine steel of him tempered by generations of careful breeding to something as supple and as strong as whipcord.

To my astonishment I heard two o'clock strike. I felt I had known Lady Dawlish and this quiet, comfortable room all my life. I rose to go.

"Where do you live, Mr. Braden?"

"In Fitzroy Square."

"But that is a long way."

"Perhaps I shall find a cab. If not, I can walk."

"Of course you must not walk! I will drive you home." Picking up her cloak, she left the room.

"Michael, can't you dissuade Lady Dawlish . . . ? It is really absurd. . . . I suppose she saw my foot."

He smiled.

"She's an angel," he said quietly.

Tradition is against inquisitive probing. I longed to ask how matters stood, but could not. We waited in awkward silence. In a few minutes she came in again, wearing a tight fur cap and a leather overcoat.

"Where's the car?" asked Michael.

"At the door," she smiled. "I said I should want it."

I tried to express gratitude for all this thoughtfulness, but nowadays we have lost the secret of graceful speech.

"Really awfully good . . . rotten bore . . . wish you wouldn't . . ."

"It is partly selfishness," she said; "I shall need to be on good terms with my brother-in-law."

"How splendid!" I cried. "Michael, I am most awfully glad. But you have been very discreet. Is this an arrangement of long standing?"

"Not very," he replied, and looked at his mistress as only a lover can.

* * * * *

A few days later I rang up Lady Dawlish from the Museum and asked myself to tea. It was an afternoon of clean April sunshine. The pavements were drying rapidly; the sky was a washed blue. As I walked from Down Street I wondered how much she knew of the family troubles. Michael was in the north, and I had not seen him since a quarter to three on that cold, rainy morning when she drove me home. This was frankly a visit of reconnaissance.

"How nice of you to come! Now tell me all about Michael and what he was like before I knew him, and about your sisters and brothers, and about Whern—oh, and about yourself!" she concluded, with mock apology.

"Please tell me first how much you know."

"The frankness of diplomacy! Well, I know about the row and that you stood by Michael. He told me of you before we met. Where is the rescued maiden?"

"She's with some cousins near Cambridge.

She starts at Newnham next term. I'm glad you know all you do. It makes things easier. Michael is the bravest thing alive and the most honourable. But it's no use pretending the situation is satisfactory. Harold may emerge from his lair at any moment and cause trouble. If he sees a chance of doing harm to Michael he will take it. So I hope that for the moment you will use your great influence for caution. Michael can get what he likes when he wants it. He will lose nothing by waiting a little."

She nodded, and sat for a while looking at the fire. I studied the ardent curve of her cheek and the burnished hair swept low over her broad, white temple.

"You are a public character since that iniquitous will was known," I went on, "and I should like to thank you for caring enough for Michael to lose your money. For he has none now, you know."

She tossed her head.

"My husband was not only a brute, he was something of a fool. He left a loophole for economy, and I have saved a bit these two years. It is for Michael to use as he pleases."

"And when is the ceremony?" I asked.

"Very soon now," she replied. "It will be very, very quiet; almost imperceptible."

"Shall I be asked?"

"On the whole, I think so."

I wrote to Michael describing my visit and warning him that I was dangerously infatuated with his fiancée.

3.

Michael's wedding was a little comical. The handful of guests were not equally informed of our equivocal family relations, so that Barbara's connections marvelled at the unobtrusive simplicity of the ceremony, while one or two of our friends sought dexterously for confirmation of their belief that Michael was marrying for money.

The bride's brother, an Anglo-Indian colonel with a reedy voice and a clear blue eye, incautiously opened his mind to me without finding out who I was.

"Dam' queer show!" he said. "Feller in Braden's position marryin' like a suburban doctor. Bin a row with the brother, eh? All the same, I don't fancy this hole-'n-corner business. A weddin's a weddin', that's what I say."

I was embarrassed. After all, this man was head of the bride's family. I had asked Barbara what he would think when she had excluded even her brother from enlightenment. "Dear old Jim never thinks," she had replied. "He'll grouse a bit, maybe, but he'll do what he has to do and stand by me." I appreciated this unquestioning loyalty, but regretted my present rôle of confidant. A freakish idea came to me to tell him that my top-hat was borrowed. I sought in vain for a way of escape. It was provided unexpectedly by the twins' mother. Over my shoulder I heard her, like a peroxide cheese, oozing indiscretion:

"So dignifai . . . ed! He hasn't a *penny*, not

a *penny*, my dear! But then, of co . . . arse, dear Barbara . . . a . . ."

I abandoned the brother to his puzzlement. Lady Chaldon must be silenced.

"Agatha, they tell me you are to get a diploma —for your latest hygienic improprieties. Are you going on the stage?"

She twinkled her foolish little eyes through the white mesh of her veil.

"Stoppin' me mouth, Richard? He knows his little chatterbox. Won't *you* tell me—quai . . . te confy—what these two darlin's are goin' to live on?"

"My dear Agatha, how should I know? Where are your preposterous babies?"

"Edwahd is lookin' after 'em. Ed—wahd! There he is! Hush! He-ahs the bridegroom. . . ."

Michael shook hands.

"Kind of you to come, Agatha. May I take Dick away one minute?"

I followed him upstairs.

"This has just come," he said, handing me a book. It was a superb copy of the rarest edition of Εἰκὼν βασιλική, luxuriously bound. Slipped between the pages was Harold's card.

"Pretty good—for Harold?" said Michael, with his quiet smile.

4.

They went to Shropshire for a honeymoon. Alone, I found existence in London intolerable. I was really hard up, and began to sell my books.

I dared not see our former friends for the expense their manner of life would inevitably cause me. I tried to work, but was restless and unable to concentrate. It seemed that my foot became actually painful, although I knew that the ache was in my heart. Wiltshire and its riot of roses shimmered alluringly. I could not even buy a holiday, for although I could get my food and clothes on credit, there is no running tick for railway fares. Six weeks of this torment of lonely poverty brought me, I hope, to some realisation of the abominable burden of penniless respectability. Champions of the proletariat made me impatient with their clamour of working-class hardship. Fortunate souls who have no profit from clean linen! Passing through the Reading-Room one day at the Museum an absurd impulse of sympathy led me to address a middle-aged man for no other reason than that his coat was green and frayed, and his thin boots patched and shapeless. He was peering with weak eyes at some revolting encyclopædia. I had nothing to say, and found myself almost involuntarily asking:

"Can I get any other books for you?"

The ineptitude of it! He looked up cringingly. Not having heard, he expected reproof. What did I say? I repeated the remark. Its futility was so patent that his servility became suspicion. I was either mad or feebly officious.

"I know how to get the books I want," he snapped, and turned his back.

I began to sleep badly, lying awake and tor-

menting myself with the vision of years of this drab beastliness. Six weeks, with the vital alleviation of still courteous tradespeople, had thus embittered me. To what fierce resentment or to what bestial apathy would I have come after six months ?

And then one morning Anthony was shown into my room at the Museum. He was little changed—perhaps a shade more solid; but his pale delicacy had all its wistful charm. He dusted with his handkerchief the chair I offered him, threw the lock of fair hair off his forehead with the old impatient gesture, and regarded me with smiling eyes. One arm he crooked over the chair back, the other he flung gracefully outwards, supporting the wrist in the loop of a tall ebony stick.

" I can't tell you how glad I am to see you !" I said. " I was just fed up, and you are a positive sensation. Where have you been, and have you had a good time ?"

" Dear Richard," he murmured. " Your honest face again. . . . Ceylon is so beautiful. And the brown slenderness of girls. . . . Where have I been ? Where not ? I am old with the sins of ancient empires, and in the dust of vanished majesties my footprints tell their silent tale. Also I'm damned hard up."

I laughed.

" So you come to me ?"

" . . . to hear what has happened. What is this tiresome quarrel ? I hear rumours and more rumours. I go to your rooms and the door is

locked and no sign of Roberts. I go to Portman Square and a strange butler hounds me from the door. It's fatiguing and absurd. It makes me look a fool. I am seriously annoyed."

I summarised the position. He examined his finger-nails and raised his eyebrows once or twice. As I described the decadence of Whern the corners of his mouth twitched a little. The story over, he swung to his feet and yawned.

"Good Lord! What fusses! I like to think of you hiding in that passage. In an embrasure. Harold is full of fun. So you and Michael are disinherited, and Monica and I are not? Juliette and Justine over again. But, seriously, how childish! I must bring you together again. I must assemble the parts. I must really. I am a wonderful assembler. You will dine with me to-night at Kettner's, and to-morrow I go to Whern. At eight o'clock? Excellent. Ask for my *cabinet*."

He glided away, and the draught of his movement rocked a trail of scent along the frowzy air. I frowned my perplexity at the inkstand. The *stimmung* was wrong somehow. He was still pathetically young and smooth and beautiful, but the eagerness was gone from his posing. The precocity of the boy had become the affectation of the . . . no, not even of the man. Something intermediate; abnormal, rather. I wondered what sort of people were his friends; who, indeed, had been his travelling companions. There was a heaviness about the eyes that seemed prema-

ture. After all, he was barely twenty. And the gold chain-bangle, the suède shoes. . . . Again I wondered in what company the journey had been made.

Kettner's provided the answer. In the draped and tasselled privacy of the upstairs room I found three men besides Anthony. Two were complete strangers; the third was Walter, the twins' brother. He greeted me with constraint, and I was struck with the brilliance of his eyes. Anthony introduced me to Captain Ferner and to Mr. Pryce Arcott. The former was stout and highly coloured, with thick Jewish lips and a powerful, hairy hand. The latter was sallow and very dark, so dark that one thought instantly of Indian blood. As he took my hand with his long, lithe fingers I groped in my memory for the reason of the faint familiarity of his name.

The meal was expensive and elaborately chosen. There was plenty of champagne, and talk became suggestive and hilarious. It was soon clear that Ferner and Arcott had been with Anthony abroad. They were continually reminded of some humorous or delightful incident that necessitated oblique reference and rather forced merriment. Walter began to play the pitiful comedy of white aping black. His attempts to assert himself against the conspiracy of unsavoury memory that was the foundation of the others' intimacy became more and more grotesque. I am afraid that, while I was often amused by the bawdy humour of Ferner or Arcott, I felt—and could not disguise—disgust

at this boy's crude extremism. I fell silent and watched him. In the brilliant light I could now see that his eyelids were darkened and that the red of his lips was unnaturally ripe. It was a relief to find Anthony innocent, at least, of maquillage. I made an opportunity of drawing my brother aside.

"Are you going to Whern?"

"To-morrow afternoon."

"Where are you staying to-night?"

"With Arcott. Flat in Jermyn Street."

"All right. You'll find me at the Museum in the morning."

"I'll come if I can."

Shortly after I took my leave. I had found out enough to make me wish more than ever that Michael was in town. Also, I wished to revive my memory of Pryce Arcott's name, and somewhere in Fitzroy Square I had a file of notes. . . . Outside soft summer rain was falling. As I went slowly home through the whispering lamplight I faced my share of the blame for our failure to realise that Anthony was growing up.

It was the last day of July that I got Harold's letter. He wanted to see me at Whern. Could I go instantly? I sold an etching for half its value, bought a few necessaries and a ticket, and was on Laylham platform two days later. I remember still the intoxication of that motor drive, the soft cushions, the quiet mutter of the engine, and, on each side of the flowery road, the compassionate splendour of summer. I craned my neck to catch a first glimpse of the huge gate-

way to the park, a plaster fortress with a portcullis of matchboarding and a groined roof as touchingly absurd as ever frowned over the cantings of provincial melodrama. Then the upward sweep to the crest of the woods, the crackle of twigs under the wheels, the slap of leaves against the painted side as the car swerved to this edge of the road or to that in its avoidance of ruts or patches of unrolled flint. We topped the ridge and slid silently through grey beech trunks towards the Abbey. The sun diapered the leaf-strewn ground; in the clearings bracken thrust upward between ancient thorns, and lazy flies droned in the heavy air. At last the traceried cloister was dancing by my side and the buttresses of the keep were twitching their mouldings from my path. As the car stopped under the fan-vaulting of the porch, the joy of being home again almost became anguish. And suddenly I thought to wonder why I had come and what it was all about.

Harold himself met me at the door. He shook hands without a word and we crossed the octagon hall and the large drawing-room to the new terrace that overlooked the sunny spaces of the arena. Tea was ready with its silver and fine white scones and a great bowl of raspberries. We helped ourselves, and then:

"Dick," Harold began, "I've been a damned ass. It's over now, I hope, and I want some help to pull the place together."

There seemed nothing to say, and I went on with my tea.

"I'm glad Michael is away," he went on. "He'd rub it in, and I am not a penitent exactly. But when Anthony arrived and I saw what a smeared innocent he was, I made up my mind. I'd had my fling, and I was already tired of it. The kid's appearance decided me. Touching, isn't it, and all that? You'll be uncomfortable because there are only six servants in the place. I've sacked the rest and want you to get new ones for me. I've had a row with Mallowes. Told me I'd killed his father, and they were not out to run an estate for the benefit of the likes of me! Pretty good, what? So there's been no agent this three months, and the rents are all to pot. I don't know who's living in what cottage or any damn thing about the property."

"But, Harold," I interrupted, "I can't stay indefinitely."

"Rubbish! Why not?"

I could hardly tell him of the hack-work I had undertaken to earn a few pounds, so I replied vaguely that I had "lots of things to do." He brushed me aside.

"Nothing so important as is needed here. By the way, in case there are any bills or things, I am paying your arrears of allowance into the bank to-day. Tell me if you want more. And now I want to hear about my sister-in-law. I should have come to town, only somehow—well, I wasn't quite up to facing the club. Is she as fine a woman as her photographs make her? Fancy Michael going in for romance!"

He talked on, partly to keep his composure, partly, I suspect, to prevent my thanks for or refusal of his financial peace-offering. I was sentimentally embarrassed by his determined indifference of manner, and by the resentful shame which lay behind it. By nature conciliatory, I was won over instantly by his awkward recantation, and wished to express in some way that the past was forgotten. But the words would not come, and we sought common refuge in the abrupt flippancy that is English for emotional frankness.

"Where's the kid?" I asked after a time.

"I sent him off with the two-seater to try Whern bank. He won't be in till dinner. He's improving already. I mean to keep him here—out of mischief. He's scared of me, and I drill-sergeant him—no use trying sweet reasonableness on that kind of disease."

5.

I had spent a hard morning over the estate accounts. The confusion was certainly terrible. Rent-roll, farm management, repairs account, stock renewals—all were mere ragged ends. Even the finances of the Abbey itself had been let slide. There were no household wage lists, no tradesmen's receipts. In the housekeeper's room I found a pile of bills, another in the butler's pantry; Harold's cheque foils told me nothing. "Self"; "Rogers"; "M. H."; "Rogers"; "Self"; "Rogers"; "Self"; "V."; "D. R."; "Rogers"; "Rogers"; "Rogers." It was evident that I must cut the

chaos of the last six months and work on averages from the latest remaining soundness. For four days I had toiled at thus clearing the ground. The Mallowes family had been agents for a century. From father to son. The old man, who had seen Black Whern into his grave, had died of grief at the shame of Harold's governance. The son, as I had been told, had spoken out to his employer's face and thrown up the job. I decided to appoint no absolute successor. Things had gone too far to admit of another gentleman-agent yet awhile. We must clean our own Augean stables. I would have a confidential clerk as my assistant. Nothing more formidable. An advertisement in the local paper for such a clerk, for a farm bailiff, and for a housekeeper had produced one likely candidate for the first vacancy, and no replies at all for the other two. "Shows what the righteous think of the place," commented Harold bitterly. He was getting daily more morose, and lost no opportunity of self-abasement and reproach. Anthony joined nobly in my efforts to keep away the shadow of vain regret. The boy was becoming a different person. His skin was clearer, his eyes at once more vivid and more tranquil. He was still freakish in humour and languidly ornate in speech, but the rainbow glitter that in London had filmed his transparency was fading fast. I understood that Harold had dealt somewhat brutally with the lad, and, although I disliked the method and could not myself have applied it, I was bound to admit it had the appearance of success.

On the fifth day after my arrival we met at lunch.

"You look stewed, Dick," said Harold. "How is the stock-taking going?"

"Stiff work," I replied, "and I feel upside down. I'm going to see a possible sub-agent in Rodbury. Can I have the small car?"

"Of course. We might take a gun and potter about the woods, Anthony."

By three o'clock I was on my way to Rodbury, the great railway junction and our nearest important town. It was a drive of fifteen miles, the last three of which, thanks to drays, tramlines and erratic babies, were slow going. I saw my man, did some odd shopping, and set out for home about half-past five. To my surprise the park gates were shut, and raucous horn-business was necessary to attract attention. A woman hurried from the lodge and fumbled with the heavy grille. She begged my pardon for the delay, but her husband was away up at the Abbey. There had been an accident. His lordship was hurt. With a queer uneasiness I gave the car her head. The trees fluttered by, and every now and then a low-hanging bough, freed from the thrust of the wind-screen, lashed back angrily at my face. An accident? What sort of an accident was it that drew the lodge-keepers from their placid duties?

The stable yard was empty. I left the car standing and hurried towards the terrace. Anthony must have been watching for me, for he ran across the lawn as soon as I turned the corner.

"Thank God, you've come!" His manner, for all the emphatic words, was listless, and his voice lacked body. Immediately he spoke again. "You've heard?"

How strained he looked, and yet how eerie was the indifference of his tone!

"Nothing. What has happened?"

"Harold's been shot!"

"Good God! How? What do you mean—shot?"

"I don't know who did it, although I was within fifty yards. He's bad, damned bad."

"Doctor with him?"

Anthony nodded, and stood looking away across the lawn. His hands worked nervously.

"Fifty yards," he muttered. "Might as well have been fifty miles. That blasted cliff!"

I took his arm and moved towards the terrace. There was whisky on one of the tables, and I mixed two stiff glasses for him and for myself. Then I sat down.

"Tell me about it," I asked quietly.

"For the first of how many times, I wonder!" He spoke bitterly, and his elegance, ordinarily so self-possessed, quivered with nervous agitation.

"We went out after rabbits, as you know, and tried first the sandpits. They were swarming, and we hung about a while, having quite decent fun. Harold had a couple of ferrets with him (he wouldn't take a keeper), but we hardly used them. Then he said there were a lot near Otranto, and we cut diagonally along the woods in that direction.

We crossed the grass drive high up and were not a hundred yards from the road, which, as you know, bends inward at that point. I saw someone leaning on the gate. Hardly know why I tell you, because it made no impression at the time, and was perfectly natural. It merely struck me afterwards that during the afternoon I *saw* no other soul."

"Saw?" I queried.

He nodded impatiently and hurried on:

"Well, we crossed the drive and made our way through the thick undergrowth that tops the marshy land above the fishponds. It was so thick and the flies such a damned nuisance that I left Harold and dropped to a lower level, getting into clearer ground beyond the worst of the bog. You remember that the ridge which becomes the cliff on which Otranto stands rises steeply from the very thicket I had left, and I reckoned I should reach the foot of the cliff as soon as Harold, even with the detour I was making.

"And I should have done!" he cried with sudden excitement, "if I hadn't stopped for that infernal cigarette! The flies were still troublesome, and I sat on a stump with a jolly view of the house and smoked one small cigarette. Not more than two minutes at the outside. I heard Harold forcing his way through the thicket above, and threw the cigarette away when he seemed to have got further ahead than I had counted on. You know the fir plantation below the cliff foot? And how dark it is? Well, I had just plunged

into the dusty gloom of the trees when I heard a shot. Nothing remarkable in that, but then there was a strange sound like a heavy stumble, another shot, a noise of splintering stone, and a crashing fall. I raced through the firs, and there was Harold full-length on the ground and clutching his side with both hands. He was white as chalk, and, as I bent over him, said: ' Up there—in the castle. . . . Hope I winged him.' Then he fainted away.

" Maybe I ought to have stayed by him. But I wanted to smash someone. I sprinted for that cliff and began scrambling. The rock is mere shale, and everything I seized came away in my hand. Now you will understand why I said ' saw ' just now. While I was hanging on to nothing in particular and feeling about for a fresh hold, I distinctly *heard* feet crossing the floor of the upper room in Otranto—the room that gives on to the cliff top at the other side. I got up the cursed cliff at last, swung myself into the lower room and up the stairs. No one. But footmarks across the sand and litter of the floor, and clear marks on the ground outside the window of someone having passed. I rushed into the wood beyond and listened and looked, but there was no sound nor sign. The footprints were lost in the grass and leaves, and I had no idea in which direction to look further. So I scrambled down again, did what I could to stop the blood from Harold's wound, and thought best to fetch help. Fortunately, I soon met an underkeeper and despatched him to the house with orders that all gates should

be shut and all the men assembled at the Abbey to start a search of the woods and neighbourhood. The police were also to be advised. We got the poor chap back, telephoned for a nurse and a doctor, and—— Well, that's all! The nurse was here very quickly. The doctor came a short while before you did——"

We turned at a step. It was the doctor himself. He shook hands with me and stood unhappily fidgeting with the wicker top of the small table at his side.

"I'm afraid, gentlemen——" he began. "You see, he lost so much blood——"

"Is he dead?" I asked abruptly.

"Not yet. But he is insensible and very weak. If I might suggest, any relations should be summoned. . . ."

"Please give your orders," I said. "I will send the necessary messages to—to the necessary people. Ask for anything you want. It is too late to operate?"

"Steed of Rodbury is a good man, but, even if you catch him, he could hardly be here for an hour."

"Never mind. We will telephone. Will you do that please, Anthony? I will wire to Michael and arrange immediate matters with the servants."

The doctor turned back into the house and we followed, intent on the duties of the moment. Just inside the door Anthony touched my arm.

"You see!" he whispered hoarsely. "Loss of blood. If I had only stayed! That —— cliff!"

And he clenched his hands nervously and hurried past me towards the telephone.

I have not the temperament that meets disaster with chastened dignity. Horrors frighten me, but I remember the struggle I had with the conventional impulse to go and see the dying man. Ultimately realism won. Harold was insensible; there was nothing to be done that others, better qualified than I, were not already doing; I should only be in the way. Also the paraphernalia of a sick-room revolted me, the hushed voices, the hasty erection of a façade of grief. I was too deeply shocked by the catastrophe to allow my fancy any play. Prompt action was the only anodyne. Once again I set out in the two-seater. From Whern Royal I wired an urgent summons to Michael. The post-mistress was all curiosity and agitation. A shooting accident, I told her, and Lord Whern badly hurt. Between Whern Royal and Laylham I met the inspector. He was on his way to the Abbey to conduct a formal questionnaire. I took him into the car, and we raced home, his dogcart following as best it might. When we reached the house we were informed that Harold was dead.

CHAPTER VII

1.

It is, I daresay, a common characteristic of the modern intellectual that he should sympathise with failure more readily than he admires success. At any rate, I know that my own desultory reading of history has centred for preference round forlorn causes and their leaders. I have always felt the immense poignancy of the passing of a great family, of the horrible slide into chaos (for the crude beginnings of a new era are inevitably chaotic), of some age that had brought graciousness and beauty to the world. And particularly have I cherished, like a guilty secret, romantic admiration for those men or periods who have struggled vainly, and at the last moment, to save a dying past. In all revolutions there is an eleventh hour before the end, when all the forces for good that still animate the old order gather for one supreme and desperate effort. For every dynasty that has come to supremacy, ruled in glory, decayed and vanished, there has been a Saint Martin's summer that has fended off with its wan and spurious sunshine the coming of the final darkness. And just because of their eternal failure, just because of the gallantry with which they fight their hopeless fight, and, by their efforts, harden to hatred the contempt or indiffer-

ence of their raw but victorious enemies, these individuals and shreds of an outworn society move me to a passionate sympathy. That they died to perpetuate tyranny and corruption, that they died to obstruct liberty and progress are, in my emotional view, pedantic trifles. They had fineness and they had gesture, and their brave flicker in the very jaws of destiny is the badge of their superb and foolish courage.

But the picturesque imagination is focussed for distance. The near foreground becomes prosaic, just because it is actual and familiar. Also, I suppose, the evils of our own time appeal directly to that same indignation that is ideally roused by the trappings of historical narrative. In other words, the sympathy given in theory to a forlorn hope is already pledged in fact to the few desperate reformers. So it came about that I did not realise until afterwards that, in a small way, I myself played a part in the melancholy drama of an eleventh hour revival, and that, in miniature, the passing of Whern was the passing of a dynasty, and so, twice removed, the passing of an age. Even if I had so realised, I believe my humanity would have tricked me of posturing, for I was of the new in ideas while hating its prophets, and of the old in manners while sorrowing for its selfishness.

Looking back, however, on the few years that form the period of this story, I can now only see events through the romantic haze of my partialities and am tempted to periodise and to establish the logic of their sequence. Black Whern outstayed

his time. By the harsh violence of his nature and by the seclusion to which it bound him, he kept alive beyond the turbulent dawn of a new and menacing century a conception of life and society that belonged to the complacent egoism of Victorian peace. His death left vacant a throne of a type long out of date, and, simultaneously, filled it with one untrained in the old school of dignified benevolence and ignorant of the transition doctrine of unassuming comradeship. Harold had a hopeless task and, even if he had realised his problems as problems, there was nothing, with his inherited tendencies, that he could have done to solve them. He was born at the end of one epoch and invested with too much power at the beginning of another. Without education in anything but self-indulgence, he faced an existence of a complexity undreamed of by the generation that preceded him. Exceptional character might have triumphed over these initial disadvantages. But Harold, being what he was, lived his riotous decadence and paid the last penalty for faults not all his own. True to precedent, he passed from the scene before the real crisis of the play, for the violence of his death was, so to speak, gratuitous and not an item on the programme. Had Michael been the eldest son, Whern and the privilege of Braden might have survived. As it was, and despite the disastrous interlude of his brother's supremacy, Michael chose to fight for the restoration of caste. To me now this fight, with its ultimate inevitable uselessness, seems moving and gallant. But at

the time my allegiance was divided (there was a cause of my own for which to fight), and I would seek to excuse this too elaborate digression as small and tardy amends to the brother I could only half-heartedly support. If I sank below half-heartedness and was guilty of actual treachery, there can be no amends. But this at least I struggled to avoid. How Michael, with his dry and fanatical devotion to an idea, would despise my romanticism!

"You have no convictions except æsthetic ones," he once said to me. "Taste and kindliness make good room fellows, but bad soldiers and worse generals." I comfort myself by thinking that gods are not consulted as to the nature of sacrificial offerings. Let these pages of absurd confession be a votive gift to the memory of a very honourable man and to a brother more loyal than was he who writes them.

2.

With Michael's accession the rehabilitation of Whern began in earnest. It was due mainly to his own faultless instinct for gesture that the process was so rapid and that for Braden a second golden age seemed to have dawned.

I have used the word "accession" more by instinct than of design, because no other can adequately express the pomp and dignity with which Michael came into his inheritance. He—and his wife with him—hurried to Whern in response to my telegram, but he chose to regard that visit as having been made incognito and to reserve for

a later occasion the more ceremonious welcome that he considered to be due. Naturally the period of mourning required immediate delimitation. Michael's first instruction was a full twelvemonth. I greeted the proposal with dubious silence, and he took me up sharply.

"A Whern is dead. That is all that matters."

Barbara ventured an interruption.

"There is a heap to do, Michael dear. Oughtn't you to be free to get to work a little sooner than that? Entertaining, you know . . . Besides, you don't want to underline the last six months, do you?"

He gazed at her thoughtfully. I knew that his level, scrupulous mind was weighing her argument against his own ritualistic instinct. Then he smiled with affectionate approval.

"Yes. I think you are right. A year is too long. We will say six months' full mourning and decide later on what shall follow. And now I want to out-Barbara Barbara, because I feel it essential there should be some gathering of the tenants. They must get to know us and to understand that the Abbey is once more in working order. Will you make arrangements, Dick? Nothing magnificent; the only vital thing is that no one should be omitted."

"If you will fix the date of your official arrival," I said, "I will do the rest."

And so it came to pass. On a certain day Lord and Lady Whern came into subdued but ceremonial residence. It was announced that the day follow-

ing the arrival there would be a luncheon to the Abbey tenants, and that park and gardens would be open to all and sundry. The countryside were delighted. Michael had demonstrated thus, at the very outset of his reign, that he had a true sense of what was required. From the moment that his train stopped at the platform he was hailed as symbolic of the good times everyone felt sure were coming.

The tenants turned out in force, and the journey from Laylham to the Abbey was something of a triumph. Barbara played her part to perfection, and many were the cheers that greeted in her at once the long-looked-for mistress of Whern and a very lovely lady. Michael's genius for benevolent landlordism was again clearly shown at the fête and luncheon on the following day. He made a speech, and afterwards, as he moved about among the guests with simple words of greeting, I marvelled at his skilful blending of friendliness and condescension. Indeed he required no apprenticeship. Feudal lordship was in his very bones.

As September drew on, Barbara began to chafe a little against the restraint of family mourning.

"We might have such jolly parties," she said to me one morning, as we strolled down the long walk of the kitchen garden and appraised the trellised fruit trees, the lines of late peas and runner beans, the winter treasure of flamboyant cabbage and developing cauliflower.

"Poor dear!" I said. "Are you bored already?"

She laughed.

"Bored! I'm working harder than ever in my life. Bulbs and planting out and all sorts. No, Dick, it's not boredom. Only I should like to see the place full of people and have dances and so on."

"It can't be done this autumn. Michael will never allow it. But we might manage a few neighbours, and we can always illuminate the garden and play waltzes."

She clapped her hands and began extravagant schemes for a satisfactory simulation of social merriment.

Michael consented to the inviting of a small party at short notice, in order, perhaps, to profit from the unusual beauty of the weather. Also, he was very anxious to establish prompt and proper relations with selected houses in the vicinity of the Abbey, and was too naturally an host not to stifle reluctance to a slight breach of the strict seclusion that he felt to be technically correct. Having gained this, her initial point, Barbara found it easy to arrange a so-called "impromptu" dance and to prevent her husband from investigating too closely the rapidity with which musicians were provided.

Perfect weather allowed garden illuminations I had, somewhat regrettably, proposed, and a poet's moon hung over the arena of woods and lawns, watching like a gentle eye the return of merriment to Whern. Dancing was, of course, not for me, and I slipped away about midnight to smoke a pipe on the stone seat of the upper garden which, at the side of the Abbey and facing

south, ran some little way up the hill. From the house came a faint sigh of music, so muted as to have lost all but the sensuous throb that is the very soul of waltz-time. The trees, under the moonlight, were flattened into the sky, and their leaves, cut into jagged planes by black shadow-gulfs, were so rigid, that one could imagine them smeared to stiffness with quiet, bronze paint, or, like the grass, heavy with elfin snow. The Gothic fantasies of the Abbey pile were, in this magic light, fretted miracles. The central tower soared gleaming to the velvet sky; against the interior light the tracery of the windows climbed to intricate harmony.

To my surprise I saw Barbara mounting the garden steps.

"Give me a cigarette," she said, and seated herself beside me.

We smoked in silence, then—

"This is your triumph, Dick," she said, "not ours."

I looked interrogation.

"I mean that we are here and all happy again. It is thanks to your organising and your energy. I have looked for you everywhere to thank you for a masterpiece."

"Please, please . . . ! But I am glad you are satisfied. Anything I have done was for you—and Michael, of course."

She leaned back and gave a little cry as her bare shoulders touched the cold stone.

"You'll catch cold," I said, "running about with nothing on."

"Really! And I'm a parcel compared to some!"

"Let me get you a wrap."

"No, no, of course not. Stay where you are. I want to ask you to do something for me—for us. I have spoken to Michael, and he agrees you are indispensable. Come and live here. Chuck your old Museum and come and look after us. We've kept you three months and nobody has complained. Or would you die of boredom?"

"Madame commands," I said. "Besides, how lovely it is!"

And indeed at that moment I should have agreed to anything, so beautiful was she and the night and the peace in my heart. She sat with her head tilted slightly upwards, the brooding majesty of her face paled to an ethereal calm under the thoughtful moon. The hair swept low over one temple was dark as a banked fire that smoulders at its core. Her straight nose and the sullen fullness of her mouth were more than ever Barbara. And I sat up with a start, for I remembered, unaccountably, that this was Michael's wife.

"Ought we to go down?"

She looked at me gravely, but I thought her eyes smiled.

"Perhaps we ought."

"Look," I said, "how foolish the Chinese lanterns seem. I wish we had left them out. They are too hot and quarrelsome."

"And the only darkness is just outside their radius."

We sat and brooded on our own fatuity.

"Ought we to go down?" she asked, throwing away her cigarette.

"Perhaps we ought," I replied solemnly, and followed her with a delectable breathlessness towards the house.

In this manner, then, did it come about that Whern became once more my home.

3.

My chronology is at fault. In haste to relive those muted but glorious beginnings of the new Whern, I have omitted all the tortuous embarrassment that accompanied the hunt for Harold's murderer. It was an unsuccessful hunt, as Michael intended that it should be. Up to a point he dissimulated cleverly and his evasions were taken for genuine, if uninformed, attempts to help. But as the days passed I could see bewilderment in the eyes of the police. The situation became a little strained. Then news was telegraphed—a man was arrested in a common lodging-house in Portsmouth. He was sullen and would give no personal particulars. A local policeman from Whern Royal averred that the prisoner's face was familiar. Possibilities were narrowed down and he was provisionally identified with a certain Joe Wharrock, the sailor son of old Whern tenants. The inspector reported with complacency. At the trial everything would be established.

"Trial for what?" asked Michael.

The inspector stared.

"I ask," went on Michael, "because I see no evidence. Your case will break down. Vague identification by a village constable will hardly form a basis for a murder charge."

"Well, my lord, I feel satisfied myself that this is the fellow. But enquiries will be prosecuted in the village. To begin with, your lordship's agent can give information regarding this Wharrock and his parents."

Michael smiled his fatigued but tidy smile.

"I have no agent yet, Barnard. Mr. Braden here is the only authority on the tenantry."

"A poor one at that," I added.

Inspector Barnard glanced with puzzled suspicion at the two of us. He could not understand this unhelpful attitude.

"Surely there's someone . . ." he began with emphasis. But he checked himself, picked up his cap, and strode to the door. "Well, my lord, I'll be getting along. Let you know any developments to-morrow."

For some minutes after he had left neither of us spoke. Michael rocked himself gently to and fro on the curb-fender, his shoulders hunched against the mantelpiece, his empty pipe jerking idly from side to side of his sarcastic mouth.

"Dick," he said at last, "what about these Wharrocks?"

"As it happens," I replied, "I saw them not long before—er—before all this business. I visited the cottage to examine for repairs. The old man is an amiable weakling, a survival of the Victorian

feudalism, too sugary, too courteous. The old lady was defiant and—not exactly rude, but—well, terse in her manner. I discovered why."

Michael looked at me with lazy intentness. I continued:

"Naturally I enquired about their children and tried to make myself agreeable. The son was expected home from a voyage, but there was no certainty when. The daughter had been in service at the Abbey. She seems to be in Plymouth now."

The inflection of my voice gave unconscious emphasis to the last words. Michael kept his shrewd, inhuman eyes on my face. He jerked his pipe still more spasmodically, and with one foot sketched the pattern outline of the rug. Then he nodded reflectively.

"I wondered," he said simply.

I took his quickness with my own.

"The connection never occurred to me, Michael,' I said. "Of course . . ."

"And now you understand my want of fervour in pursuit?"

"Understand—yes. But I'm not sure if I agree."

This was so unimportant that my brother made no acknowledgment of even so tentative a difference of view.

"It is just possible," he went on, "that Barnard has fluked on to the right man. Possible, but nothing more. I think I shall go over to Portsmouth. Is there any evidence of the staff here in Harold's day?"

"None."

Michael nodded.

"And did you gather that this girl was—so to speak—get-at-able in Plymouth? I mean—has she an address?"

"Oh, it's not a visit to an aunt," I said. "Nothing of that kind. Plymouth is recognised as—you understand?"

"Perfectly. The business can be managed. From what you say the sympathies of the mother (and she alone counts) are with the son. Therefore she will, if necessary, deny that he was ever at home. Even if an identification is contrived, there is no shadow of real evidence connecting young Wharrock with the crime. On the whole, matters have turned out well."

He tilted forward to the perpendicular and stepped off the curb. Then with a yawn:

"Damned idiots men are!" he said. "Ring up Barnard now and tell him I'll be in Portsmouth to-morrow. He is to do *nothing* until I say the word. Nothing. Make that clear."

The case against the Portsmouth vagrant was prosecuted for a while by police enthusiasm. But there was no evidence, and the matter was allowed discreetly to drop. Lord Whern declared that he had visited the prisoner and satisfied himself that the man was a native of Dorsetshire. Not only did he deny having been near Whern; he had clearly never heard of it. The suggested identification with Joe Wharrock was never made public. No valid assertion of resemblance was forthcoming, and old Mrs. Wharrock maintained that

the young man was on voyage and had not been in England. Shortly afterwards the Wharrocks left Whern Royal and retired to a cottage on the outskirts of Rodbury. It was understood that his lordship had been generous in the matter of pension, for Wharrock was an old servant of the Bradens, having been woodcutter at Whern for thirty years or more.

Thinking the matter over afterwards, I was not surprised at Michael's cool disregard of common principles. In psychology he dated from the time when caste was above law and when social duty was coincident with self-advantage. To Barbara, however, the affair was a shock, because her husband was really a stranger to her. Perhaps it is for the reason that over this matter the first break in their harmony was noticeable that I remember it as deserving of record. And yet, oddly enough, she approached the question from still another point of view.

We were talking some days before the police made their arrest.

"It should not be difficult to get the fellow," I said. "Particularly if Harold hit him. Wounded men are not common objects nowadays." I was conventional at bottom, and in this, as in most else, prone to platitude.

"Poor man!" said Barbara.

"Why poor?"

"I hate to think of him creeping the countryside in pain and fright."

"After all, he murdered Harold; and there's no proof he was hurt at all."

"H'm. That's true. But the fact of his killing Harold . . . we do not know his reason. And in any case, everyone is against him."

"Your soft heart . . . !" I smiled, but through my complacency struggled contempt for the fat playfulness that made *my* sentimentality selfish where *hers* was at least generous.

She studied me gravely.

"You are afraid of pity, Dick, as you would not be afraid of danger."

And then came the evening of Michael's return from Portsmouth. After dinner we pressed him for details.

"Wrong man," he said laconically.

I laughed.

"Chuck it, Michael. This isn't a police-court. Tell us what he said."

"He was uncomplimentary," replied my brother. "As a family we displease him."

"No wonder," said Barbara, who was now as familiar as I with what had transpired.

"I did not allow myself," went on Michael coldly, "to approve or disapprove of his opinions. They are unimportant. But I made it clear that I proposed to take no action."

His wife rose and sat on the arm of his chair.

"You darling!" she murmured, hooding his head with the smooth beauty of her arm and shoulder. "It was splendid of you."

Michael glanced at her amusedly.

"Not splendid, child. Perfectly natural. It

wouldn't do, you know. I've an uphill task already, and to start with such a scandal . . ."

She drew back quickly.

"Wouldn't do . . . ? Do you mean . . . ? Oh, Michael, you are not trying to deny that you did this out of sympathy ? Are you also so scared of emotion ?"

He replied, with an aggravating sniff:

"Sympathy ? The man is nothing to me."

"No—but the girl . . ."

"Good heavens, Barbara, you talk like a melodrama. Girls of that class must look after themselves. She asked for it, I've no doubt. Leave Harold and his follies alone. The poor devil's dead. We are concerned with the present and future. I cannot have more scandal, and I will not allow this place to be the centre of a sensational trial. So——"

"So you have lied to save yourself !" she broke in angrily. "Oh, I am ashamed !"

His glance of cold surprise checked her abruptly.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly. "I was a little raucous. Thank you for the care with which you protect our tranquillity."

And she went silently from the room.

Michael let no trace of feeling disturb his composure. He passed smoothly to another subject of conversation. But I felt uneasily that this misunderstanding was greater than had yet appeared and I wondered for the first time, as I came to wonder more often and with growing certainty, whether the tragedy of Harold were not really

the more serious tragedy of Michael. Dominion had come too soon. A few years of obscurity and Barbara would have softened his rigidity by the mere assertion of her wifehood. As things were, she was only his consort, which might not have mattered, had not the day gone by when consorts were content to remain so.

4.

Amid the pallid débris of the dance I walked and wondered. It was only nine o'clock, and no one had appeared. Gardeners were tidying up, and I saw a barrow half-full of fairy lamps, little husks of dingy glass that had last night winked roguishly along the edges of the lawn. The weather was mild and bright, but my eyes felt tired and my skin dry and taut. My pipe was at once tasteless and burning, and I cursed the too many cigars and cigarettes of a restless evening of gaiety. As I walked I wondered—wondered why Barbara had suggested my staying on at Whern, whether it were wise to do so, whether I wanted to do so. Of course I wanted; of course it was unwise. But if I could be of any use, to consent was natural and proper. And then I wondered who would be the first person to put in an appearance, and, inconsequently, when Michael was going to town.

On the broad top of the balustrade I sat and bit my pipe stem till it cracked. The pale sunlight intensified the alternating black and white of the ivy-covered ruin across the lake. The slope of woods was a background of glowing reds, yellows.

and browns. Among the beeches, oaks, birches, and elms were a few evergreens, emphatic characters scrawled in black across some gorgeous Eastern weave. There was the breathlessness of autumn in the quiet air, and near me, on plant and masonry, innumerable webs stretched like jewelled discs.

"Good-morning, Mr. Agent!"

My heart dipped and slid. I started upright and found myself smiling into her eyes. She was pale, and the droop of her mouth was heavy with fatigue.

"You look tired," I said.

"I *am* tired, Dick; beastly tired. I couldn't sleep till it was too late."

Callowness never dies, and my impulse was toward the conspiratorial "Nor could I," but self-ridicule, often called self-control, coughed warningly in my mind's ear. Instead:

"Michael doesn't go to-day, does he?" I asked.

"No—Monday."

"For how long?"

"I suppose he'll be down Sundays, but I don't think for longer than a week-end till Christmas."

"And what is to happen then?"

"That's what I wanted to discuss with you. I have a letter from Monica. She must be great fun."

"Fun?" I said. "Let us say 'stimulus.' Where is she? Has she ever written to you before?"

She handed me the letter. It was short, but intimate in its vivid flippancy. Monica hoped Michael was a satisfactory husband, was sure Barbara would be the making of him, and longed to see her new sister-in-law. In conclusion, she announced her own arrival in London early in

December with her fiancé, and could they come to Whern for Christmas, because they meant to be married in February, and she wished to blush before the altar with the sweet confusion of an English maiden fresh from the dear old home. Not a word about Harold. In a postscript a message to Michael that both she and Putzi wanted to hunt, and would he please do the needful.

"If Monica wants to come for Christmas she'll come," I said.

"Excellent. Can't we collect the family and ask them each to invite a friend or two? Would that be unseemly entertainment? Surely not. I want you all to feel this is your home, and that I don't matter."

"You make all the difference," I said.

"What a nasty speech!" Her retort was a shade over-swift. "And when I've just said I don't want to make any!"

I side-stepped to subjects of general interest.

"There remains Mary of us. We needn't bother about other relations, but the twins must come. You remember their ludicrous mamma? At the wedding? Like a perambulating meringue."

"Tell me about Mary. Why have I never seen her?"

"Why have not I? She has been Cambridge-bound for eight or nine months. She has hardly written to me; and yet we were very good friends. I am interested to see what has become of her."

"Then I'll tell Michael about Monica, and, if he agrees, we'll fix up the party."

5.

Autumn paled to winter, and life at Whern became for me a thing compounded of quiet happiness, with rare flashes of excitement or twinges of fear. As these usually coincided with my brief periods of absence, I concluded that daily contact with Barbara was forming from our intimacy a solid friendship, at once estimable and pleasant; that accordingly I had done right to stay on at the Abbey, and that the more continuously I was there, the more right—and the more upright—I became. Also there was genuinely work to do. Gradually matters fell into order. I had secured a good man for my assistant or sub-agent, and, as things had fallen out, nothing more was yet necessary. Naturally, I made a point myself of establishing personal relations with most of the local tenantry. Generally once a fortnight I had an opportunity to discuss matters thoroughly with Michael. My chief worry was an area of cottage property in Rodbury. The houses were in a bad state and overcrowded; also, as much of the land lay in a triangle enclosed by railway lines, it tended to be a pocket towards which drained the lowest type of poor. The worst slums in cities are usually to be found in just such oddments of land. Rodbury was not London nor Leeds, and doubtless Nine Elms, Pentonville, and the alleys off Dewsbury Road could provide more sensational material than the comparatively small Feetham Street area that was my trouble, but the Whern estate was

so little industrial that any problem of low-class urban property was a serious one. Although both Michael and I agreed that the cottages should be demolished, we realised that there was no money to spare for so drastic an undertaking. Therefore it was with relief and delight that I opened one morning a letter from a firm of lawyers enquiring, on behalf of the railway company, whether Lord Whern would be inclined to sell this very district. With Michael's authorisation I interviewed the solicitors and grasped that the land was of essential importance to the company for a scheme of developing the goods and passenger facilities at Rodbury. Negotiations were prolonged, but ultimately they paid over a large sum of money, and the triangle of courts and tumble-down tenements passed for ever from the possession of the Bradens. The capital thus acquired was invested in shipping and industrial shares, partly in England, but mainly abroad. A time came when this investment made possible for me what would otherwise have been impossible. But of that at its proper time.

As in my actual existence, so in this posthumous narrative (for it is one Richard Braden that writes of the failure or the triumph of another), the human element crops up constantly and always. I could fill my mind with the duties of my regency; I could spend long days motoring from village to village, from farm to farm; but at the back of my mind were for ever the personality of my brother, the personality of his wife, their relations to one another, and my relations to them both. During

those weeks of November and December there might have been only the three of us in existence, so intense was my preoccupation with ourselves. Anthony, whom I saw constantly; Mary, who would appear at Christmas after close on a year of silent absence; Monica, with her foreign nobleman—were labelled boxes of which the keys were on their way, but not yet arrived.

I have recorded the scene, at the time of the arrest, when Barbara took for pity what was really Michael's pride. The incident helped me to understand the foundation of their marriage, and to myself I hazarded some such reconstruction as the following. Barbara met Michael during his brief period of exile. He was in that cruellest of positions for the conscious aristocrat—the position of a martyr to moral principle. Any less bourgeois form of martyrdom would have fed and nourished his dignity, but, for a person of his temperament, the knowledge that his action might be held up for the shallow ridicule of the easy moralists of his class must have been torture. Under these trials he bore himself with quiet determination, emotion seemingly reduced to a scientific formula, anger and embarrassment frozen to punctilious attitude. Barbara Dawlish, her natural warmth and gaiety only then venturing timidly from the defensive listlessness to which they had been driven by the old satyr who had bought her girlhood, recognised in Michael what she believed did not exist—a man with appetite only for an idea, a man with brains and with, at the same time,

the upright conservatism that only breeding can give. Michael, on the other hand, saw in her primarily a victim of circumstance, an outcast as he was from that upper room to which both by rights belonged, and, secondarily, a thing of beauty. His pride of isolation could not reject such noble companionship in distress. Probably he welcomed her acquaintance as strengthening the cause of righteousness. Probably, also, he endowed her with a dynastic eminence she did not really possess, a slight enough piece of favouritism for an incipient lover. He frequented her company, and was tempted gradually to an unfolding of his aspirations, to a slow abandonment of the reserve with which he faced the world. She was all sympathy and understanding; or so it seemed. Actually, I suspect she read into his perplexities and unhappiness something more humane and ideal than the rigid devotion to the conception of nobility that sustained him. He, on his part, took her encouragement for a like worship to his own of quality as against quantity. And before there was time for the reality of their concord to be questioned, he flamed into consciousness of her womanhood and fell in love. I have spoken of the occasion when, at the height of his infatuation, I met him and Barbara at the cinema. I have said that he was so unlike the Michael I knew that the external sameness was uncanny, cloaking as it did a being I hardly recognised. It was as though a familiar statue had come alive. The symptoms of her affection escaped me. It was

the first time I had seen her; she was a woman, and mistress of her emotions. But I think my feeling was accurate that her fondness was more admiring than passionate. His cold brilliance dazzled, and the woman in her worshipped the unflinching light of his distant courage.

But when circumstances set Michael on his rightful throne, she began to suspect fanaticism where in adversity she had seen only single-mindedness. His devotion to duty, his methodical integrity, were as complete as ever, but the end to which they were directed puzzled her. At the time, for example, when the sale of the Rodbury tenements was first discussed, she endeavoured to follow out the implications of the proposed transfer of ownership.

"I'm so glad, Micky," she said. "It has been horrible to think we could do nothing to make that place better. I'm all in favour of closing."

"At any price, child ?"

"Oh, I don't know about values ! But Dick said something ending in thousands. It sounds heaps."

"I think we can get more, Barbara," I said. "The company must have the land."

"And they'll pull all those dreadful slums down ?"

Michael nodded.

"I imagine the whole space will be sheds and sidings. They'll have to bank up a lot of it. They're enlarging the station too, Dick, aren't they ?"

"Then where will the poor people go ?" asked Barbara.

Her husband shrugged his shoulders.

"But they must go somewhere," she persisted.

"Really, Barbara, I'm not a housing authority."

She looked at him with troubled eyes.

"No, of course not. But somehow it seems we are a little responsible. They have lived in filth because our predecessors—well—didn't, or couldn't, bother. And now they are merely to be driven away. . . ."

"I'm afraid, my dear, that is hardly my business. There are other houses in Rodbury——"

"Glenny told me two days ago the place was crowded out, Michael; that working families were camped on open spaces, and that the company were putting up hundreds of men in an old factory."

"Well, then, they'll have to go somewhere else." He turned to me: "Will you write to Turner about the title-deeds and tell him I won't go below the figure we arranged yesterday? Now, I must write some letters. Send Miss Carrick up to me, Barbara."

He left the room.

This tiny incident developed. It happened that Barbara met the Socialist leader on the Rodbury Council at a bazaar the following afternoon. From what she told me afterwards, I gather that he painted a moving picture of housing conditions in the town, and expressed a wish that some philanthropist would urge and assist the railway company to build a garden city for some part of the huge population that depended on the great junction. Incidentally he enquired whether nothing was to be done to improve conditions in the Feetham Street district.

"I couldn't tell him about the possible sale, you see," she complained, "and it hurts me to have to say we are planning no repairs nor clearances. He asked me if I'd ever been in person to see what the place was like. So I asked him to take me."

"When?" I queried, rather startled.

"We went at once," she replied calmly.

"Well?"

"Oh, it's disgusting! No human beings could be expected to keep pigs in such places. Grown-up girls and young men herded in single rooms, in single beds even. No water; no sanitation. I don't want to exaggerate. I've seen worse in Liverpool and South Wales and in London; but this time I felt hideously guilty. Especially as——"

"Yes?" I prompted her hesitation.

"Especially as Mr. Verney made a point of telling people who I was. . . ."

"The devil he did!" I said, and wondered what the fellow had in mind. I knew Verney slightly, a bitter fighter and a genuine, if unscrupulous, extremist.

"That was not very courteous," I added aloud.

Poor Barbara looked distressed and worried.

"It seemed to make—to make things harder for me. But I suppose I deserved it. The contrast to *this* . . ." and she swept her arm towards the long drawing-room with its shining furniture and pale, exquisite rugs.

"Then I hope all the more the company will buy," I said.

CHAPTER VIII

1.

It is not easy in a narrative of this kind to hold a balance of values. Happenings in retrospect are more definite than in actual experience, and indications, noticeable to one who has learnt their later significance, pass imperceptibly at the time of their first faint appearing. Wherefore, if I have given an impression that the tranquillity of Michael's headship was as yet even gently ruffled, I am misleading the reader at the same time as I am paying his due of accuracy. Christmas and its house-party were so complete a success that a new and glorious era seemed indeed to have opened. Whern was in a way to become once again a great Wiltshire house. The honour of Braden was all but re-established. Michael worked hard to create so soon an impression of solidity and importance. In London politically, in Wiltshire socially, he was winning a rapid way to prominence. Every Sunday that he spent at home was devoted in the morning to the work of landlordism or to political correspondence; in the afternoon and evening to some form of social responsibility. Horsemanship and good shooting stood him in good stead, and he earned the respect of the surrounding landowners more by his style

and daring in the hunting-field and by his skill with a gun than by any community of ideas. I daresay they found him personally stiff and aloof; certainly he regarded them as either gross or flaccid. His only real intimate was Shrivenham, an earl of the old school, who at the age of fifty was still a bachelor, and lived a life of feudal and solitary splendour behind the mediæval walls of his famous house near Dauntney Abbas. Shrivenham was an acquaintance of Michael's boyhood. He would invite the lad to Dauntney for long afternoons, which were spent pacing the lawn or before the log fire in the huge, open fireplace of the banqueting-hall. Michael would give no details of his visits to the strange, proud man, who refused dealings with Black Whern, and from whom Harold would have looked for recognition last of the whole population of Debrett. There can be no doubt, however, that Shrivenham's influence was strong with my brother, and wholly on the side of that rigid etiquette of caste, to which Michael's own nature so strongly inclined. It was common knowledge that Shrivenham had, since his undergraduate days, been haughtily exclusive to the pitch of absurdity. Before he inherited, or thought to inherit, the title, he had dreamed of nobility and the restoration of its ancient prestige. With the earldom came the opportunity for living his imaginings, and he took that opportunity with zest and magnificence, if, also, with a certain lack of humour.

To his old mentor and respected senior Michael

now returned as more of an equal. He made the renewal of relations between Dauntney and Whern something of a test of the success of his policy of rehabilitation. To spend two days with Barbara at Dauntney was a step in the right direction, but it was not until Shrivenham (in a moment of kindliness which I suspect he later regretted) promised to spend Christmas at Whern that Michael felt he had triumphed. Certainly the name made a startling heading to the very homely list of the other guests. But Michael maintained that Shrivenham had only consented because the invitation was to a family gathering. I think he regarded this star visitor as a collector regards a rare edition or a priceless vase, for there were few houses in England that the lonely man had ever been known to visit.

"It's rather awful!" said Barbara. "I almost wish he wasn't coming. We shall have to behave so well."

We were having breakfast.

"The Pope himself wouldn't impress Monica," I remarked from the sideboard, where I was busy with the coffee-pot.

"Incidentally, don't forget that he is very High Church." Michael's warning was comically serious, as though we were children, likely to be tempted to awkward questions by a visitor with a glass eye.

"You must address the family, Micky," said his wife, "and see that they understand."

Her tone was of a gentle solemnity, and Michael

seemed wholly unsuspicious, but as I came to my place I glanced at her amusedly, for I heard the irony behind the wifeliness.

"Who exactly are coming?" asked Michael.

"Monica, her Hungarian, and her friends the Easterhams; Mary and some friend from Cambridge—Jim, I *hope;* Agatha Chaldon and her husband and kids—er—us three, of course, and Anthony—*and* Lord Shrivenham. Are you asking a selection of political pundits?" Barbara smiled at her husband.

Michael was genial and took no exception to a familiarity that would, at a less favourable moment, have provoked chilliness or even reproof.

"Not this time, I think," he replied. "They can wait. Well, everyone seems provided for except poor brother Richard. Who is he inviting?"

"I have no friends," I said simply, and I confess that the look of sympathy from Barbara was not unhoped for.

"Rubbish!" said Michael briskly. "What about that little woman in Chelsea—I forget the name——?"

How calamitous is the roguishness of the serious-minded! On his normal occasions Michael lacked resiliency and on matters of intimate principle was ignorant of compromise, but he never fumbled. And now, in a sudden access of levity, he was guilty of this clumsy tactlessness. He had recovered his poise at the last moment in time to feign forgetfulness of a name, but too late to acquit him of a seemingly wanton cruelty. For

a second I stared at him speechless, too much amazed at the brutal resurrection of a dead sorrow to reply. Then, as it entered my head:

"Oh, you mean that poor little cripple, Alice Macgregor? She has left London and gone to her folks in Scotland. I hope she is happy at last."

Michael was as near blushing as his calm pallor would admit; I could see that he was marvelling at his own indiscretion. He made a pitiful pretence of gratification at my news.

"I am glad. I have often thought of her and how she must miss you."

There was silence. Why did Barbara say nothing? I dared not look at her, fearing every second that she would press, in her kindly curiosity, for more detail of this imaginary and, so far as I could judge, painfully mawkish Samaritanism of my uncertain past. Michael spoke again, with nervous off-handedness:

"We shall only be fifteen, then. They'll come on the Wednesday, I suppose? Christmas is Friday, I think. The horses will be ready enough. You'll see the small course is in some sort of order, Dick? Barbara will arrange the evenings. How splendid to be able to leave these details in such able hands!"

His complacency was as little convincing to my ear as had been his interest in that infernal cripple. It was a relief when Barbara rose suddenly and announced that she heard someone in the greenhouse and wished to send an order to the kitchen garden.

When she had disappeared, Michael came behind my chair and laid a hand on my shoulder.

"Dick," he said, "I just cannot conceive what possessed me! It was as though someone else had begun the sentence. I apologise. Forgive me."

"That's all right," I muttered, and bent over my marmalade. "But you startled me. I had almost forgotten it." Then, in a sudden revengeful moment: "Her name was Ursula," I said, "Ursula Clavering."

He withdrew his hand sharply and walked to the door.

"I have already apologised," he observed coldly.

When she returned Barbara found me alone, staring absently at the table-cloth. She stood at the French window a moment, and I felt that her compassionate eyes were watching me. I looked up and forced a smile.

"Hullo," I said. "Have you made sure of to-night's vegetables?"

"Poor Dick!" she replied softly.

She became a symbol of comfort as she stood against the light, her arm raised to the heavy curtain, the slight curve of her rounded body a faint question-mark. In the face of this gentle plea for confidence, my reserve broke down.

"I should like to tell you," I said, "I insist on telling you, Barbara—all about it."

"Better not, Dick . . . Please . . . Unless it helps . . ."

Once again the breath of encouragement, once again the far call to confession.

"It more than helps. I should have done so before if I had not—forgotten about it."

"You shall tell me to-night, Dick," she said. "Not now. To-night."

It was Monday morning and I remembered that Michael left for town immediately after lunch.

2.

"This is the story," I said casually, "whether you care to hear it or not."

Barbara tilted her feet on to the sofa and reached down for a cigarette. The gesture caught my attention. It was unfamiliar to me as coming from Barbara, but yet I recognised it, and with a sudden twinge of discomfort. The long slope of the bare arm, the fingers like flickering ghosts groping along the dark floor, I had seen them often before. Often and often. Many times from just such a deep chair as this had I watched, with dreamy fascination, the uncanny vitality of pale, gliding fingers, the motionless column of a tense white arm.

"What's the matter?" asked Barbara. "Go ahead."

I apologised.

"It was only your reaching down like that and feeling about for the cigarettes. It reminded me . . . Now for the story. The business began at the Chelsea Arts. I was just down from Oxford, very intense both in my frivolity and earnestness, rather hypnotised by the glamour of studios and

the pseudo-Bohemianism which our caste is apt to affect. I had gone to Covent Garden with a party of eight or nine. I almost forget now who they were; anyway, it is of no consequence. Of course I was as useless a dancer as I am now, but I wandered about in a remarkable turban, prided myself on knowing lots of people, and generally had a vapid and entertaining time. Then about three o'clock I ran into an actor I knew who was standing with a girl and looking about him in a worried way. He hailed me effusively and, after a few words of triviality, asked his partner whether she would excuse him for a few moments. He had promised to give an important message to a fellow-actor, had forgotten it, and now felt a sudden fear lest the man might be departing.

"'This is Mrs. Clavering, Braden,' he said. 'Your well-known charm of manner—all that kind of thing——'

"And with a bow he left her to my care.

"She was small and dark, with a face powdered dead-white, brilliant lips, and eyes like purple crocuses in snow.

"'Are you the Mr. Braden whose name I see in *Notes and Queries?*'

"I am sure I blushed with pleasure. And was she related to Clavering the sculptor?

"'I have the privilege to be his wife.'

"'Is he here to-night?'

"'Oh no! He despises such frivolities.'

"I had enough perception to utter no conventional compliment of her husband's work. It

would have been insincere at best, for Clavering was a maker of daintiness and allegory, and his popularity was of the kind that demands continual repetition of one somewhat tenuous achievement. Apart from all that, however, I had an instinct that the subject would fail to grip.

"We drifted to a seat and talked, ostensibly of books and pictures and furniture and music, but actually of other people. She was very gay, and a mistress of that spiced comment that is always indiscretion and often malice. The time slipped away. I wondered idly where my party had got to. Suddenly she said:

"'You have passionate eyes, Braden. I suspect you are a secret poet.'

"The use of my surname flattered me even more than the actual tenor of her words.

"'It sounds a disreputable and evil thing,' I said lightly.

"'I didn't mean quite that,' she laughed. And then, after a pause, 'Though if I had done, I disagree.'

"The remark had so clearly ulterior implication that I made no reply, but docketed the speaker in my mind (as doubtless she intended I should) under the heading 'Genuine Bohemian.'"

Barbara smiled slightly at this point, and I caught her up.

"Don't laugh at me! I've admitted all the callowness and provinciality."

"I'm not laughing at you, Dick! It was only a smile of affection for your vanished youth."

This jarred me slightly, so I resumed my story.

" ' What is the time ?' was Mrs. Clavering's next question.

" It was after four.

" ' Let's go home,' she said.

" We left the theatre together and walked westwards through the cold, clear darkness. At a coffee-stall we had a hot drink. I asked her where she lived. Chelsea. I was in rooms in Westminster at that time—as you know, the parental roof was not quarrel-proof—and, with unnecessary pomposity, suggested I should see her home ' because it was on my way.' We found a taxi. She pulled me towards her.

" ' It's cold,' she said, with a pretty shudder. ' Come and sit right up to me.'

" We travelled to Chelsea in very close company, but she made no further remark or gesture that was in any way forthcoming. As we pulled up at her door she laid a hand on my arm.

" ' Come to tea to-morrow, Braden ?'

" ' I should love to.'

" She jumped out, shut the door, and then poked her absurd little head in at the open window.

" ' Good-night,' she said.

" ' Good-night, Mrs. Clavering.'

" ' Oh, la la !' she exclaimed. ' Not like that, *please !* The name is Ursula.'

" ' Good-night—Ursula,' I replied, with what was doubtless charming gaucherie."

This time Barbara laughed outright. I queried the joke with raised eyebrows.

"You are so perfect, Dick! The candour of your detachment!"

"But——" I began.

"Oh, it's splendid; most accurate. But I didn't think many men analysed their effect on women so thoroughly."

Once again I felt slightly ruffled, and once again I hastened to proceed.

"Well, I went to tea. By daylight she was more alluring because less considered. With fancy dress she sloughed off the powder, and the sallow languor of her skin had the gentleness of grass from which snow has melted suddenly; her crocus eyes were less violet than against the mask of make-up, but in their greater softness more caressing. She greeted me gravely. It was a desultory visit. Conversation jogged through a slumbrous countryside. Such sense of adventure as may have possessed me faded into drowsy comfort. Clavering came in just as I was leaving. He was terribly the artist—Vandyke beard, double bow-tie, even a velvet coat. He pressed my hand absently, ran his long fingers over his wife's hair, took a macaroon from the plate, and, munching it, drifted from the room again. . . .

"To this day I cannot understand why anything more ever happened. I was not bored, but I left the house with that feeling that something looked forward to had proved a failure and that the future was without landmarks. Nevertheless I was there again three days later, this time for lunch.

"So it went on. You must understand that

in appearance and in fact this acquaintanceship was perfectly normal. There were usually other people there; I was merely one of a crowd of friends. Similarly when, as happened with growing frequency, I asked her out, it was to meet my friends (I had quite a lot in those days !) and my relations. Monica and Michael got to know her well. You remember how the whole question was revived this morning ? Michael came to regard Ursula as a special fancy of mine. Only that, as they say, and nothing more.

" What a rotten story this is ! It just drivels on, as my friendship with Ursula drivelled on, for months."

" Until——?" queried Barbara.

" Exactly. Until——"

She smiled encouragingly.

" There again !" I said impatiently. " Until nothing—nothing that I can *tell*, so to speak. It just happened. One day, I suppose, the romantic conceit of youth whispered to me that Ursula's friendship might be something more. I began to wonder why she saw me so often. And, naturally, having once begun to imagine that she was ' asking for it,' I came to regard it as incumbent on my virility to deliver the goods. So I slithered into love-making down the rope of my vanity. She feigned resentment. I was very persevering and masculine. She began to weaken. It was all wonderfully according to convention——"

" Dick !" interrupted Barbara, " don't be cynical. You know it was lovely at the time."

I stared at her. And I realised that she needed only this touch of hedonism to be perfect. For a moment I had a vision of a sunlit glade, a riot of autumn leaves, and heard, just out of sight, the low laughter of pagan girlhood. Her high colour and the firm splendour of her throat. . . . Then the urgent faun in pursuit—and my eye caught the clumsy patent leather of my cripple's shoe. A hoof indeed ! Instantly I was a drawing-room lover, an ugly thing of intrigue and starched linen. The wild beauty of the forest of love shrank to a furtive daub, with lamp-posts feebly tricked out as trees, and over the entrance of a pasteboard glade a rain-blotched signboard promising dubious hospitality.

"Lovely ?" I said thoughtfully. "Is fake passion ever lovely ?"

She laughed.

"Good heavens ! As if—— Never mind; get on with the story."

I determined to risk a throw.

"You talk like a worshipper of Astarté."

"Did they talk much ?"

I gripped the arms of my chair in dangerous excitement. And then once again she reached for a cigarette. It was as though a lantern slide had been interposed between us, for I saw Ursula and not Barbara, and the sparse mockery of past failure blotted out the opulent promise of a new delirium. The tension relaxed.

"Matches," I said, and threw the box into her lap. She lit her cigarette and lay back on the cushions.

"Do get on," she said dully.

The story had become an indescribable ennui. I felt so tired that even speech required deliberate effort. There had been an emotional miscarriage; the climax had come before its time and unnaturally. Properly managed this tale of Ursula should have gently led up to—what? At least to an effect of some kind. Its only purpose was to react on the relationship between Barbara and me. Of course we both realised the force of fictional stimulus. That was the idea of the whole thing. And now—— Best to get it over quickly. Wherefore, feeling shamefaced, but, I hope, not looking it, I resumed:

"Having assumed the part of lover, I became fairly competent. Clavering was abroad. We wandered into the studio after dinner, and the moon, shining through the glass roof, threw a strange, thin light over the pale lumps of statuary. It was like being under water, and the graceful nudity of the familiar Clavering nymphs looked as nearly actual as was possible to anything pertaining to them. I felt a stirring of desire.

"'He must have charming models,' I said.

"'For example?'

"She was standing full in the moonlight. Her white dress blended into the pallor of her neck and arms. It seemed to dissolve first into mist, then into transparency. She became one of the throng of them, as faintly alluring in the soft greenish light. Only her dark hair and the velvet shadows of her eyes gave her the touch of humanity that made her nudity a challenge and not mere passivity——"

I heard my own voice and the studied rhythm of the words. Embarrassed and doubly weary I stopped short.

"Charming, Dick," said Barbara lazily. "I can picture it entirely. And you took her in your arms. Row of dots across the page. 'At dawn he left her—left her lying there with her dark hair straying wantonly over the pillow——' That's the way it goes; admit it."

"Please!" I said. "You are right to puncture an inflated style, but I don't *enjoy* telling this, you know."

She glanced at me and melted to divine sympathy.

"Poor Dick!" crossing to my side and sitting on the arm of my chair. "I am a brute. I've been a brute all the evening. Don't tell me any more."

"I must finish," I said quietly. The high seriousness of the morning was upon us once again. My love for Barbara was once again an inspiration and not, as it had so lately been, a fever. She went quietly back to her sofa.

"I really loved Ursula after that night. Before, I had been a little conscious of my own daring, and, at the same time, a little afraid of her, but now she became the very reason for existence. We were everywhere together. Even Michael twitted me on my devotion, and, as you can imagine, he was the last of my circle to do the heavily humorous. One evening I asked her to come away with me. Clavering was due back in England, and the very thought of him made me sick with jealousy. She

refused. I implored her. She demanded respite for thought. 'What about money?' she asked. It was to my then infatuation a delicious touch of the practical. I enlarged on my prospects. 'But why can't we go on as we are?' I told her I loved her too much and all that. All the old protestations, you know, but they were true enough then.

"The next day I rang her up to say I would be round by nine o'clock. She had to go out; was horribly sorry, but couldn't avoid it. The day became a wilderness. In the evening, restless and miserable, I walked along the river to squeeze a drop of comfort from melancholy gazing at her house. And then a taxi drove up, stopped at the door and disgorged a passenger. Crossing the road quickly, I was able to recognise him as he passed inside. It was a young novelist, a friend of Monica's, to whom I had introduced Ursula a week before. At first I was too trustful of her to suspect deceit. I recrossed the road and leant over the river parapet, watching the lights and the faint shadows on the blue darkness, and, half unconsciously, going over in my mind what had just occurred. Suddenly a wild idea flamed across my brain. Furious with anxiety, I went straight to her door and rang the bell.

"'Mrs. Clavering is not at home, sir.'

"As I turned away, believing but still perplexed, something fluttered to the pavement at my feet. It was a ribbon of crimson velvet, and, as I held it in my hand, I heard Ursula's voice float mockingly

along the darkness above my head. 'Fly away, ki—ite!'

"I have that ribbon still. She used to wear it in her hair, and I knew only too well how the hair slipped over her white shoulders once the ribbon was removed. It was a bad night that followed. I was too young to endure with suitable nonchalance. Also I loved her. The next day was the last before Clavering's return. There was a dinner party at Ursula's and I was to go, as usual, an hour earlier than the others. I went. She received me with her customary affection and expressed alarm at my coldness. I blurted out my anger and my misery. I must have been pitiably absurd. At the end I went on my knees to her and begged for her love. She said very little; merely that I must have mistaken the voice, that she had not been at home the night before, that the velvet ribbon was either my imagination or had fallen from the window of another house.

"The guests arrived slowly. Michael was among them. Last of all appeared the young novelist. You can imagine what that dinner was like for me: I could give you every detail of the table decoration, the menu, the women's clothes. There was ice pudding with almonds stuck all over it. And cheese straws in rings. I thought the guests would never go, but I was determined to outstay them all. By twelve o'clock only I and the novelist remained. Ursula yawned. The novelist looked at his watch. The clock ticked dispassionately from the corner. Suddenly Ursula held up a finger. 'Hush,'

she said. Steps were audible in the hall. She turned to me.

"'Good-night, Braden,' she said. 'Here is my husband.'

"I was too angry to reply. She shrugged her shoulders and, when Clavering came into the room, walked straight to meet him and took him by the arm.

"'Jim,' she said. 'I cannot get rid of Richard Braden. He has been annoying me for weeks, so to-night I told him you were still abroad—just to see what would happen. Will you please help him downstairs? He has a club-foot, so do not hurt him. It is not as though he was all of a man.'

"She turned her back on me and went straight over to where the novelist was sitting. I heard him snigger and her say conversationally:

"'I am sorry my husband is so late. It was good of you to wait so long to see him.'

"That is all. I have not seen either of them since."

"But Clavering? What did he do?"

"Oh, he was all to pieces. Hadn't got a kick in him. He just followed me downstairs twittering nervously. Poor devil, I daresay he felt he ought to apologise to me for the unpleasantness."

"Then how did Michael know?"

"You would hardly expect the novelist to hold his tongue? The clubs knew all there was to know and rather more by lunch-time the next day."

"Oh, Dick, how awful for you!"

"It did me good. It's hard work living things down. Anyway, *you* know now what really happened, and that is what matters."

"Thank you," she said simply.

3.

Mary was the first of the party to arrive. She wrote Michael a postcard announcing herself for a day nearly a week before Christmas. In a postscript she added, "Sloane comes Wednesday." Michael being away, his secretary gave the card to Barbara, as affecting household arrangements. "No train mentioned," observed Barbara, when I stopped on my way across the hall to enquire what perplexity was wrinkling her placid forehead. "No shred of a detail. And what is Sloane?"

I read over her shoulder. The message was written with evident affectation of untidiness. The script slanted heavily upwards and occupied only the extreme top corner of the postcard.

"I'll look out some possible trains," I said. "Don't you bother. As for Sloane—time will show. Some advanced girl graduate, I expect."

I looked out trains and decided that one reaching Laylham about four o'clock would appeal to a reasonable traveller from Cambridge. At about half-past three, just as the car was preparing to leave, Mary walked into the yard and so through the back door. Here she was confronted by one of the footmen, who asked her business. Her reply was laconic and unsatisfactory, and the man

sent a boy to tell the butler to tell me that a young person was enquiring for Mr. Braden. Unsuspecting, I gave instruction for the visitor to be shown to the housekeeper's room. I then returned to my letters. A few seconds later voices and footsteps in the hall outside my door spoke of dispute and urgency. I opened the door and saw a small figure in a shabby brown blanket coat and small velour hat standing unemotionally in front of the portly butler, who was gesticulating—respectably but unmistakably gesticulating—in the direction of the servants' quarters. The stranger turned and saw me.

"Good heavens, Mary!" I cried. "Where have you dropped from? All right, Levitt; it's Miss Braden."

Levitt retired with dignity. Mary gave me a pinched whimsical smile and a faint but chilly hand.

"Good-afternoon, Dick. It's a long time since I was here."

"How did you get up?"

"I walked from Plaughton."

"*Plaughton?* But there's no railway."

"I got a lift there from Rodbury."

"Luggage?"

"It's in Rodbury somewhere. Verney said he would leave it at the Co-op. offices. There's only a suit-case and a hamper of books."

I was riled.

"Upon my word, Mary, you are fairly casual. How do you imagine it is to come all that distance

here? And which Verney? And what in the name of heaven took you to Rodbury at all?"

Again she smiled with gentle abstraction.

"I seem to have upset your arrangements. Is her ladyship using all the cars?"

The sneer made me sufficiently angry to realise that I was so and to set a guard on my tongue.

"Well, never mind. I'll see what can be done. And we must find Barbara. I think she's in the park practising approach shots. We didn't expect you till tea-time. How are you? And why have you never written to me?"

"I'm quite well," she answered. "I'm sorry if you were expecting letters. I have been very busy."

She showed a complete lack of curiosity as to Whern and the new regime. I remembered that she had made no sign of any kind at the time of Harold's death. Rather tediously, I myself supplied the gaps in her behaviour. It was conventional of me and, I see now, must have provoked her considerably.

"We are very busy too," I began. "The place is getting straight at last. Michael works like a Trojan, and Barbara—well, you'll meet her in a moment and judge for yourself. After tea you must come round the house and see the alterations. You are to have your old room. The organisation had gone to pieces. Poor old Harold——"

"Why poor?" she broke in. "He was a blackguard."

I looked at her levelly.

"So that explains it," I said quietly. "It was strange hearing nothing from you, when the family was in trouble."

"Drivel!" she retorted. "That's pure mawkishness. You know well enough he deserved anything he got. But you were always a sentimentalist."

We were crossing the park, and I was glad that the sight of Barbara, brandishing a golf club from the edge of our very improvised links made comment from me unnecessary. Mary was evidently difficult. I waved my cap to Barbara and felt suddenly foolish, as though I were a silly old man surprised by a supercilious daughter playing bears with village children. Embarrassment drove me to the fatuity of shouting.

"Hullo!" I cried. "Here's Mary come early!"

Barbara hurried towards us. She wore a short tweed skirt, and her beautiful ankles, her strong brown shoes, and her general air of cleanness and strength restored, as with a click, my balance and my self-respect. She bent impulsively to kiss her sister-in-law, holding her by both hands. Mary turned an impassive cheek, released herself hurriedly, and once more smiled that beastly smile.

"Dick is angry with me," she said, "because I've lost my luggage."

This was grotesquely inaccurate, but at the same time precluded explanation on my part. I held fast to my newly-won control. Barbara gave me a humorous glance and took matters in hand.

"I've dropped my mashie somewhere. There it is. One second."

She ran back towards the golf course, picked up her club and rejoined us. The pocket of her sports coat bulged with balls.

"Let's come and see about tea. Have you seen your room? It's your old one. And we are putting your friend next door for company. There is a connecting door."

Mary threw back her head and laughed aloud. It was an unpleasant laugh, as of one who unmasks hypocrisy and seeks to shame the hypocrite by mockery. The laughter faded suddenly and, when she spoke, it was in her usual flat voice.

"That's rather rich," she said. "But we're not like that, thank you. House tradition dies hard, I see. I must tell Sloane. He'll be faintly amused."

"*He*——" began Barbara. Then clearly she realised the insult of Mary's other words. She bit her lip and I saw her sombre eyes flame. But courtesy conquered, and she echoed politely her visitor's laughter. "What a stupid mistake! You see you gave us no indication. We thought your friend was a girl. I am so sorry."

We had reached the edge of the sunk fence and skirted the ditch towards the plank that gave access to the lawn. Barbara looked back at the massive browns and greys and blacks of the December woods.

"You don't know how much I love this place already," she said. "I have told Dick and must tell all of you, so that you will know the intruder is at least conscious of her good-fortune."

I watched her, and with the devout wonder of an

astronomer gazing at a discovered star. She was at once profound and lyrical, warmly intimate and immeasurably distant. The love of the familiar overbore adorations. She became the symbol of our Wiltshire countryside, of the very woods themselves, as once she had seemed a symbol of comfort. The embodiments blended, and I felt steal over me the soothing power of her imperial tenderness. Then, suddenly and brutally, the male in me awoke. I wanted her. The dark hair straying from under her leather hat; the dusky warmth of her proud cheeks; the strong, smooth column of her neck; all the taut slimness of her rich young body called to my desire and called again. She was imperial, but she was vincible. . . .

A sensation of adjacent emptiness chilled me to reason. I looked for Mary and saw that she had crossed the plank and was walking towards the house. I was angry at her rudeness in thus ignoring her sister-in-law until I realised that I, in the imaginings of a few seconds, had dishonoured Michael's wife. Shivering as one fresh from a bout of fever, I turned away and left her standing there.

4.

In a long racing car of glittering aluminium Monica and her Hungarian swept upon Whern. Putzi had become something of a prophetic legend. Anthony pretended to expect a bronzed desperado with fierce moustaches and the costume of an opera brigand. Mary explained too often that the

Magyar aristocrat was a tyrannous survival and that this future brother-in-law was certainly arrogant, dissolute, and half-witted. It was, therefore, either a relief or a disappointment to find that the leather parcel who had driven Monica was, when unpacked, a slender young man with a slight black moustache and expensive London clothes. He spoke English fluently, and only in his wild, dark eyes and in the curve of his finely chiselled nostril was there a hint of his romantic ancestry. Monica was vivid as ever and more beautiful. But she seemed older, and her verbal stridency was muted. Perhaps Putzi, for all his knowledge of English, found much of her slang unintelligible, so that she was constrained to grammatic convention and, like a bird in a cage, drooped a little in the matter of song. It became evident, however, that the real reason of her mellowness was love. She was infatuated, and an elaborate assumption of imperious aloofness towards her fiancé only emphasised the fact. On first acquaintance one would have said that Count Koloszvary suffered the extravagant indifference of his mistress with the humorous gratitude proper to an English gentleman. With greater familiarity, however, one realised not only that Monica's off-handedness was the provocative bluff of the girl in love, but that Koloszvary, behind his submissive courtesy, bided his time. Also it struck me how completely he put her from his mind when not in her company and when engaged in some absorbing occupation or discussion. It is not difficult to feel the abstrac-

tion in the mind of another man, and such abstraction is usually noticeable in the English lover whose lady is elsewhere. Not so with Putzi. He had a time for women and a time for other things. I suppose it was his tradition. So we witnessed the paradox of a young woman, heedless and selfish in her fiancé's presence, *distraite* and gentle when he was not there, and a young man who showed quiet courtesy to her waywardness, but, in her absence, forgot her utterly. By the end of their visit I was not sure if I liked Putzi altogether; and this vague feeling was quite apart from my hatred of his cruelty, which he showed unmistakably out shooting and in a glimpse I had of his treatment of his servant. I was far from accepting Mary's cliché denunciation. Besides, he was clearly very intelligent. But we are accustomed to a kindly indolence that cloaks slow but fair-minded energy, and there is unfamiliarity in a strenuous intelligence that cloaks indolent despotism.

It was amusing to notice the clash between Michael's theory of aristocracy and that of his Hungarian guest. The former had, I suspect, cherished great expectations. In this nobleman from a feudal land he thought to find a kindred soul. The example of an unspoilt past should inspire his own fight for privilege. But the conceptions were so different as almost to be opposed.

"You are more fortunate than we," said Michael, after dinner. "At least, you are given credit for tradition. Here we are judged as parasites, who must justify our existence. And yet I am con-

vinced that my tenants are happier and more prosperous than peasant farmers."

Putzi showed his gleaming teeth.

"Our people are savage," he said. "They know nothing."

"But you are educating them ?"

"Indeed not. Why ?"

"*Why !* To show them there are other interests, wider thoughts than drink and struggling squalor."

"If they believed that, they would work less, and my revenues would fail."

Michael then enquired as to methods of agriculture. What had always been, still was. But the return could be increased and the labour lessened. Again, why ? Putzi was clearly a little bored. He could give no figures of his estate population. He knew nothing of their way of life. Social democrats there were in the large towns, pestilential fellows who made the workers discontented that they might themselves have luxury. But he was so seldom even in Budapest that their excesses did not worry him. Michael endeavoured to discover what proportion of his guest's land was under wheat or barley or maize, the extent of the vineyards, the numbers of livestock.

"I am so sorry !" laughed Putzi. "I will telegraph to my bailiff. If you are interested . . ."

And his voice trailed off into faint contempt for the preoccupations of this English lord. On the Riviera and in Paris, in Vienna, Wiesbaden and Petersburg he had met a few and heard tell of many English noblemen. Obscurely, again, he had always

resented a little their curt frivolity. And now that he was to marry a girl from this very class of model aristocrats, he found her brother half politician, half farmer.

I have ventured to interpret Putzi's thoughts because he took little trouble to conceal their drift. At the same time, he was impressed with Michael and, despite himself, dominated by Barbara. He spoke of her to me once with wistful admiration.

"Our women are not like that," he said. "She is so—er—normal. Is that the right word ?"

And I assured him that it would do excellently.

Mary, after one encounter, avoided the tyrant. In a day or two I had recovered from the shock of her dogmatic dreariness. I realised that her novelty was not, as in Monica's case, an overlay of some fresh experience. She had developed along the lines destined for her, and it was prejudice to mistake for perversity what was only normal evolution, To the reflecting eye it was possible to recognise. in the shape of the chrysalis we used to know, the moth that had emerged from it. I do not say that this view was generally accepted. Barbara, for example, worried for some while over her sister-in-law's brusque intransigeance; but then, of course, she had no criterion for understanding. Michael would not stoop either to condone or to condemn. His impatient egotism diagnosed Mary's complaint as "Cambridge swelled head," and it was manifestly useless to draw the possible parallel between his own riper but none the less assertive

fanaticism and that of his sister. Anthony found Mary funny and enjoyed ragging her. When she came down in a hat covered with small feathers and brooding like a sitting hen on the very top of her unbecoming coiffure, he clucked loudly and scratched the carpet for grain.

The arrival of Sloane was a natural pretext for more persecution. He was a lean, bent young man with a pale, gloomy face. Apparently quite unembarrassed by his presence in this house of strangers, he would talk to Mary at meals in a loud, dry voice on subjects that were evidently perennial. Their conversations were formless, like instalments of a serial. I noticed that the habit of prefacing remarks with silences of varying length was not confined to intercourse with strangers. Anthony and Monica gave an imitation of the method one afternoon. The text was based on a novel by a young Cambridge genius, which happened to be among the week's batch from Smith's. It was a love scene.

ANTHONY: I suppose you know I find you stimulating.
MONICA: Yes. (*Silence.*)
ANTHONY: Stimulus is—— (*Silence.*)
MONICA: Yes?
ANTHONY: Why, after all, should I bother you with my troubles?
MONICA: I am interested. Troubles are so——
ANTHONY: Yes? (*Silence.*)
MONICA: If you could understand how I hate my mother!
ANTHONY: She is doomed. (*Silence.*)
MONICA: I must think.

ANTHONY: You are rich, I hope ?
MONICA: Not rich, no. Not rich. But I have something.
ANTHONY: I have only my flaming heart and the cold precision of my brain.
MONICA: More brain; O Lord, more brain.
ANTHONY: That's been said before. . . .
MONICA: Repetition is nature's impressionism.
ANTHONY: Two and two make four.
MONICA: Need they ?
ANTHONY: It depends. Besides it rhymes; I'm talking blank verse mathematics. (*Silence.*)
MONICA: You are in need of money ?
ANTHONY: Yes. (*Silence.*)

By this time the caste and the audience (Barbara and I) were losing our gravity. The door opened and Sloane's peering face showed itself. He stared foggily at the four of us.

" Are you looking for Mary ?" asked Barbara kindly.

" No," he replied, and continued to gaze about the room. There was one of the famous silences. Then:

" I am looking for my boots," he said. Another period of silent inspection. " But they do not seem to be in here."

The door closed. We broke down entirely and the play ended.

5.

For all its heterogeneity, the party enjoyed itself. Indeed the clash of personalities set up a discord that was more heartening than repellent. It was good hunting weather; the food was excellent.

Barbara had a talent for self-effacing hospitality. She was like an electric radiator, that heats without show or noise. Even Mary and Sloane melted to her warmth. Indeed, after a scene with Michael over church-going, Mary became almost kittenish, and her dancing in the parody pantomime we extemporised on New Year's Eve put her fellow chorus girls to shame. We tried to persuade Michael to play Mephistopheles, but he took refuge behind the duties of host which kept him at Shrivenham's side. I think Putzi was rather shocked at Monica's Aladdin, but he was plied with Pommery before the show and became too intent on managing his own legs to trouble unduly about hers. Dolly Easterham played principal girl with such verve that Shrivenham applauded loudly and drank her health with special emphasis as the New Year ticked into being. She was an intriguing little soul, pink and powdered, with fair, fluffy hair. Her method was babyish candour, and she did it well, although others before her have discovered what point is given by innocence to worldly wisdom. She played Monica a trick that caused an hour of comical tension. Finding a lay figure in a large attic once used as a studio, she dressed it in Putzi's dressing-gown and put it in Monica's room. Then she rang the bell in her own room and sent the maid to borrow some powder from Miss Braden's dressing-table. This happened about ten o'clock, and dancing was due to start in half an hour. Unluckily, as the girl was retreating in embarrassment from a seemingly occupied bedroom, Monica

herself came along the corridor. So the fat was in the fire. Putzi talked of shooting Easterham through the head at five o'clock next morning. Doubtless it was the least he could do, for Monica was furious and cursed Dolly publicly for a "filthy little meddler." Poor old Easterham was very engaging.

"Damn it, Whern," he grumbled, "I can't go gadding about the park at five o'clock! It's not light! And I never get up till eight-thirty. Never!"

I took Monica aside.

"You must calm Putzi," I said. "He'll start a massacre for twopence."

She had not understood that her fiancé's threat had gone abroad. Dignity was never so strong a point with her as humour, and she forgot her own grievance in the delight of the new situation.

"And he is really challenging Charlie? How perfect! What a paladin! I shall tire my hair and give him a love knot and watch the tourney from a turret window."

"It will be dark," I objected.

"Then they must alter the time. Just after breakfast is comfortable."

Charlie Easterham lumbered towards us.

"Look here, Monica, for God's sake tell Koloszvary to chuck it. I'm beastly sorry Dolly annoyed you, but, upon my word, to go creepin' about in the long grass like a comic brigand with a pop-gun! . . .

Monica assumed an air of injured haughtiness.

"My honour, Charles . . ." she said.

"Damn your honour! No! I'm beastly sorry. Clumsy of me. I mean—I quite understand.

But really—Braden," he turned to me, "do say somethin'. It's . . . it's *absurd!* We don't do these things. Jolly old middle ages and all that, of course, but . . . Look here, will it do if I give Dolly a good leatherin' with a slipper?"

He looked from one to the other of us with sudden hope. Monica jumped at a new extravagance.

"Agreed!" she cried. "But I must be there."

Poor Charles stared in dismay. This was worse than ever.

"Must you now?" he asked feebly.

I laughed so uncontrollably that Monica's mouth began to twitch. Easterham was scratching his head and staring at the floor. Dolly floated into the room.

"Monica *darling*," she cooed, "I'm so *miserable!* Oh, *there* is Charlie after all! I heard he was dead. That terrible fierce man of yours shot him. Charlie—do you know me?" She wound her arms round her husband's short square body and hid her face on his shoulder. He jerked himself free.

"Don't be a fool," he said gruffly. "One's enough, and you've made me look a fairly big one."

She stood with her hands clasped demurely before her, questioning us with her great baby eyes. I laughed more than ever, and Monica finally gave way.

"You idiotic angel," she cried, and took Dolly in her arms. "They shan't shoot your stupid great husband. There, there . . ."

Putzi, when informed of the reconciliation, shrugged his shoulders unconcernedly.

"Very well," he said.

CHAPTER IX

1.

THE Christmas weather remained soft and purple-brown. Along the forest drives the brown leaves lay damply, and between one field and another the little trees spread their knotted and purple fingers against a brooding sky. The hunting continued excellent and I came to know once more as an event of normal life that delicious jumble of tea and muffins and whisky, taken all mud-spattered as we were, in a long room quietly lit with, at the far end, flames laughing and leaping, the echoes of their merriment sounding from every polished surface of the fine luxurious furniture. Not for long had I been barred from this life of strenuous idleness, but my exile had not been so short that I failed to recognise good-fortune now it had come my way. I tried my moralising on Monica one afternoon, as we jogged home side by side from a six-mile point and a kill far down the valley to the east.

"I wonder whether this is the kind of life you'll have in Hungary. Somehow one pictures it as more savage, less scrupulously planned."

"Haven't the foggiest," replied Monica briefly. Then, after a short silence, "Do you like Putzi, Dick?"

"Of course," I said.

"What a kindly old donkey you are!" she laughed. "Why of course?"

I reflected. Why, indeed?

"I don't know," I said frankly. "Anyway, I do."

"Are you scared of him?"

"Not in the least. Ought I to be?"

"Idiot. No—but it is your saying that about life out there . . . I'm fascinated by him, as I daresay you've noticed."

She flashed an impudent glance from under the rim of her regulation hat. It was so like Monica to forestall criticism in this way that I was quite ready for her.

"I have," I said. "It reminds me of the bow of Ulysses."

"I never bend, Dick," said Monica. "I break."

I laughed.

"Wait and see," I replied. "This wedding is quite near now. What about religion?"

"Putzi's arranging it. I'm turning into something very decorative and unbosoming. My confessional will be hot stuff, won't it? A long one, with a slice of lemon, as Harold would have said." She raced off down this sudden avenue of side-argument. "Tell me about Harold. I've been meaning to ask you, but kept forgetting. And you're the only one who'll tell me. Michael would be annoyed, and then the ice would melt and spoil his profile. Tony's too young. Mary—— I almost said too old! What *has* come over the child? She's——"

"Please! We were about to discuss Harold. Which is it to be?"

"Sorry! Harold, of course. What exactly happened?"

I told her. When I had finished she laughed; laughed quite a lot.

"Monica! You ought to be shocked and grieved!"

"I *am*, Dickie. Inside I'm all blush. I keep it off the bits that show because of the colour my hair is. All the same, you'll admit there's a drollery in trying to run an Agapemone in a kind of ecclesiastical birdcage. Like the girl who wore openwork stockings and felt cold in patterns. Besides, the poor old chap 'reformed,' didn't he? —at the end?"

"You're rather a dear, Monica. I wish you'd been here. Somehow I felt sorry for Harold, but as no one else did I supposed it was moral weakness on my part, or worse, and choked it down. Also he pulled Anthony through. The boy was in bad company and getting a little revolting. Harold took him in hand, like a recalcitrant puppy, and figuratively thrashed him into usefulness. He now talks of soldiering."

"Yes, he told me the other night he was off to Oxford. We seem to be pulling our relations to pieces! Next, please! What about Mrs. Michael?"

"Well?" I said smoothly. "What about her?"

She laid her hand on my wrist (our mounts were walking now, slowly and close together) and,

throwing back her head, looked at me under drooping lids. I felt a sudden uneasiness.

"What about her?" I repeated, as Monica did not speak.

"I wish I weren't going abroad in February," she replied.

The inconsequence was mere whimsicality. I guessed the connecting link, and she knew that I guessed it. We had too often talked shorthand not to recognise the significance of abbreviated argument. Nevertheless her ultimate meaning was ambiguous. I decided to fence.

"Don't worry," I said.

She removed her hand from my arm and, with a vague gesture, made as if to brush aside my implication.

"It isn't *that*," she muttered. "Besides," and her voice took on a note of mockery, "I may regret as a spectator *manquée*. I was an amateur of—that sort of thing—once . . ." She fell suddenly silent and for a while we went forward without speaking. Looking at her I saw she was brooding heavily, gazing into the gathering dusk with absent gravity.

"It isn't *that*," she repeated, "although I suppose it ought to be. It's Mary."

"Mary?"

"Yes. I can't tell you why, Dick. Perhaps it's all rubbish. Only do take care. Promise me."

"How—take care?"

"Just like that. And—when does she go back to Cambridge?"

"Not for some little while, I believe. But really, Monica, be at least logical. What earthly connection has Mary with—well, with the other?"

"She hates her, that is all. I'm cold. Let's get on."

And she urged her tired horse to a last canter over the crest of the woods and down towards Whern. As I thudded by her side, I outlived the first impulse to regret that our conversation was ended. Perhaps, on the whole, enough had been said.

At any rate, and naturally, I began to pay attention to the mutual demeanour of Mary and her sister-in-law. I found that the former's deliberate aggressiveness had given place to a surface amiability that, from close range, carried no conviction of depth. Monica had taught me to look closely, and I convinced myself that, to a point, she was right in her suspicion of hostility. But clearly the matter was not a simple case of jealous hatred. There was something more fundamental in what was, I began to see, a reciprocal antagonism. Assuming Barbara's dislike of Mary was the normal resentment of one who knows herself disliked, I concentrated on Mary and watched developments closely. They were in the main logical. Although at first Mary's provocative angularity was certainly half shyness, there was in it an element of cold roguery that enjoyed the discomfort it could not but share. There was something of the twentieth-century Pierrot in Mary, a scientific, Wellsian pierrot whose waywardness was adjusted by calculation, whose

erratic selfishness had a basis of obscure but pitiless philosophy. Barbara's first reaction was disappointing. She was conciliatory, forbearingly courteous. This dispelled her antagonist's gaucherie, while intensifying the will to wound. Extremists are always better friends with each other than with moderates, and had Barbara at the outset resented Mary as an insolent *déclassée*, the latter would have been greatly flattered, and would have respected and almost liked her sister-in-law for conforming to a preconceived notion of her type. As it was, she was driven to further goading and further yet in her desire to produce at least some fragment of result.

A headache helped. Mary spent the day in Rodbury (she commandeered a car both ways), and, as I gathered afterwards, in the company of her political friends. She tackled Barbara before dinner, at an hour when several of us were hanging about the library fire loath to go up to dress, and yet restless with appetite and over-smoking.

"I hear you are going to build a garden city, Barbara."

"What on earth do you mean?" asked Barbara, who was tired and inclined to neuralgia.

"What I say, Lady Bountiful. Verney tells me you are to house the ejected from those slums of yours in a model village on the estate."

"I never heard such rubbish. I'm not going to do anything of the sort."

"So Michael put his noble foot on the scheme?" Mary could sneer with the best of them.

"You are discussing my feet, Mary?" said a voice. Michael, noiseless as ever, loomed from the shadows of the hall. He resembled a lithe, pale cat in this great, carpeted house, as he moved smoothly and rapidly from place to place.

"I was merely congratulating Barbara on an intended philanthropy. And now she denies it. I thought perhaps you did not approve."

Michael glanced at his wife, who neither moved nor spoke. Then, characteristically, he quietly changed the subject.

"Lot of trees down in Far Side Wood with the gale."

As the conversation ran smoothly from the eddy of embarrassment over the shallows of local happening, I saw behind the mask of Mary's stubborn quietude a smoulder of anger. Her first attempt to embroil her brother with his wife had failed. A few minutes later there was a move to dress. I mounted the stairs at Mary's side.

"You asked for it," I said unnecessarily. "But why unlearn lessons that you know by breeding? As if Michael would rise *under any circumstances at all* with others there."

"Mind your own business, Richard," she said crossly. "I don't know what you mean."

I chuckled.

"Merely that you are rather an ass, dear child."

And at the stairhead I turned towards my room.

I paid for my interference. And Barbara. Relations between her and Mary continued strained.

Neither said anything, but it was clear that the temperaments clashed badly. Michael made no reference whatever to the little scene I have just described. One by one the guests departed. There came a day when only he, Anthony, Barbara, Mary, and I remained. Why Mary stayed, God knows. Revenge, perhaps; but more probably simply from an instinctive cussedness or doggedness. Anyway, it led to trouble.

At this time the fever that ran in me for what was forbidden fruit raged and cooled with disturbing suddenness. For days I would be normal; then the desire would seize me and I could not speak or even be near her without my very being changing with uncanny completeness into that of a stranger. By sheer will I kept my eyes away from her until such time as I could decently withdraw and conquer the devil in solitude. One such seizure occurred during a bridge game on the night before Michael and Barbara were due to leave for town. She was my partner against Michael and Anthony. Mary was in the library working for her tripos. I began to play with hysterical stupidity.

"But you took me up, Dick!" cried Barbara plaintively, when I passed Anthony's knave on a second round.

The cards swam before my eyes. Her voice was loud with divine music. I felt that the stretch of green table was the grassy edge of the world, beyond which were magic seas, and, rising from them, this goddess clothed in passionate humanity.

"Awfully sorry," I muttered. "I mistook the ace. Thought it was a diamond."

The rubber ended with calamity. Being the last of the series, debts were settled. I pushed Michael his winnings and rose unsteadily.

"Feel queerish," I said. "Must be the port."

On a couch in a curtained recess of the octagon I tried to envisage the climax of this series of love agues. There was one natural outcome and that was impossible. Wherefore I must go away. I must find a reason for leaving Whern, return to rooms and solitary bibliography in London. The prospect was unbearable; I would go abroad. With my head on my hands I forced a staggering brain along the road of prevision. Unheard, the curtains parted and she stood by my side.

"Dick, dear, are you ill?"

Miraculously my brain cleared. I felt restored and calm. The quiet flippancy of my manner startled her.

"Cured again. I knew it was the port. Sit down, Barbara; I want to talk to you."

"Why this odd spot? We might be sitting out and making love to one another."

"It's a good place for that. I never thought of it. But for the moment, matters of less import. You go to town to-morrow?"

She nodded.

"For how long?"

"A month, I should think. Michael has folks to work off, and I want some clothes. Also, there are dances and other orgies. And Monica's

wedding. I don't think I shall come here again till after that."

"When you do," I said casually, "I shall be gone."

"Gone!"

"Yes. I'm going to Spain or Italy or—or—somewhere."

A strange giddiness rocked me to this anti-climax of indecision. My control lurched, and I felt as though I stood on a snow-slope that was stirring uneasily for an avalanche. With an effort of will I leapt, as it were, to an emergent rock.

"Even agents have holidays," I said cheerfully.

"You are tired of Whern? No wonder. It's been a heavy autumn and dull for you. But when are you off?"

In that moment I took a sudden decision.

"Look here, Barbara; let's get to facts. The truth is I am—I am—— What shall I say? I am wanting more of you than I ought. . . ."

"Of me?" She looked at me steadily. Then quietly: "I understand." Still gazing into my eyes, she played absently with her bracelet. The silence became material, a silence of draped velvet. The curtains of the alcove multiplied and curved in nightmare folds over our heads. More and more folds of stifling crimson velvet, drooping lower and lower. Through the heaviness of suffocation her eyes, like windows to distant sunlight, contracted, dilated, contracted once again.

"Listen!" she said suddenly, and in the cool breeze of her voice the fog of oppression swayed

and dispersed. "You are going away because you are afraid—not of your own self-control, not of your own happiness—but of my honour. You imagine things, and then the fit passes and you feel I have been smirched. Is that right?"

I nodded.

"It has not occurred to you—at least so I believe—to wonder how much I know or feel or —or—share of this obsession. . . . That is you. You and Michael and Anthony and all of you. You are so critical of yourselves; so humble at heart, so proud externally. . . ."

I made to speak. She silenced me with a quick movement.

"Let me go on. I am trying to get into words my experience of these months among you all." She paused to collect the threads of her argument. "So critical—too critical—of yourselves. It makes you egoistical, and the world says you are arrogant. Remember that I am more or less plebeian in comparison. I can see you—you pedigree people —from the outside. And because I love all that you stand for, all that you really are, it grieves me to see you betrayed by your own fineness. Can you not be less searchingly upright? You could save all this quiet beauty from what is inevitable destruction if you were to assert yourselves a little. . . ."

I moved impatiently. Social prophecy always bored me, and at this moment—— She smiled and bent forward, her elbows on her knees. Her round forearm and the strong perfection of her

hands lay forward over the dark carpet. Fascinated, I watched their whiteness, until they seemed to fade to transparency and through a creamy film to show the deep red of the rug below.

"I am wandering. Forgive me. You and me. Bluntly, you are fancying that you love me. You——"

"No!" I interrupted. "Be fair. There is no fancy. I am falling into love with you, and, because I am as selfish as you say, I am running away for my own sake. The strain is—oh—rotten. . . ."

"I did not mean to challenge your conviction, my dear. Only that 'love' is so composite a thing. And I doubt if you have all the elements."

Probably she saw in my eyes how this affected cynicism wounded me, for her tone suddenly altered. She leant towards me and laid her hand on my arm.

"Dick! Forgive me, dear. I am serious. What I mean is that, for some, desire is all, but for you and for those of your quality, it is only a little part. Do not betray your tradition. I have enough of my own to value that of others, even though it be finer and longer. Besides—I have had my experience . . ." With a quick gesture she swept the low hair from her forehead and stood up. "Do you imagine, Dick," she went on, looking down at me, "do you imagine that I value the honour of this, or this, or this"—with fluttering hands she touched her neck, breast, and arms—"above Michael's happiness or yours?

And now you see in them *your* contentment. But only in them. If I were ugly or crippled . . . No, don't protest! Without this body, I should be meaningless. A 'decent sort,' perhaps. It's not good enough, Dick. I am here to serve Whern —but there are limits. . . ."

Her voice broke, and she turned quickly away. With hands tightly clasped she stood silent. I shook off the lethargy that held me to my seat.

"Barbara!" I grasped her shoulder and turned her roughly in my direction. "What are you saying? What have I done to all of us? Forget that anything has been said. I will go, and it will pass with me and be forgotten. Or let Michael shoot me. In the good old days he would have me shot. Let us go and tell him so that he may see the kind of brother he has housed. And the reading of me is so hideously true. . . ."

So great was the turmoil of my shame that I did not immediately realise she was now closely facing me or that her hands were on my shoulders. Then I saw that her eyes were full of tears, and from the peak of self-hatred I swooped to a sudden smooth excitement. Her voice had a new thrill when she said softly:

"Don't you see, Dick? It is Michael. He is so pitiful; so pitifully alone. And then——"

"No more, dearest—please!"

Her face was now close to mine. Her breath became the very air in my nostrils.

"Only this," she whispered, "that it is not enough to be desired—by *you*. . . ."

With the first touch of her lips on mine reality faded behind closed lids. It seemed that a full minute passed. Then, simultaneously, she started away, a slight noise splintered heaven as a stone splinters glass, and I opened my eyes on the figure of Mary framed in the parted curtains and looking at us with silent triumph.

I like to think that we behaved with dignity, even in that moment of shameful disaster. A cynic would say that dignity is the only solution of the insoluble, and certainly there was no remedy, no possible explanation. All the same we kept our heads.

"Come and sit down, Mary," I said quietly. "We might as well put you *au fait* with the earlier part of our conversation."

She said nothing; merely passed through the curtains, which fell to behind her, and seated herself stiffly. Barbara, who had drawn back against the wall at the first sight of the intruder, slipped into one corner of the settee as Mary approached, and was now motionless. I remained standing.

"I was telling Barbara," I began, "that——"

"Dick," she interrupted coldly, "I prefer there should be no further explanation."

"I agree it is unnecessary," said Mary sharply.

"Unnecessary to whom, please, Mary?" asked Barbara.

"To me, at this moment. Later to—whomsoever I may tell."

Barbara smiled bitterly.

"Delightful! Let us make a list."

"Again unnecessary. I have the details in my head."

Rising to her feet, Barbara turned to me:

"We are detaining your sister, Dick, and risking absurdity. You will forgive my leaving you?"

And she was through the curtains and vanished before I had time to move or speak. I heard her footsteps clacking coldly across the marble floor of the hall. Then I turned to Mary.

"Well? What do you expect will happen now?"

Mary, to my surprise, stood up and faced me squarely. Her attitude was not unlike that of Barbara five minutes ago. Inwardly I chuckled at the humour of externals. The thing became fantastic, for she put a hand on my shoulder. But after that there was no cause for chuckling, for, bowing her head against my coat, she burst into tears.

"Oh, Dick!" she sobbed. "That it should be you! What am I to do? What am I to do? Dick, Dick! Forgive me!"

At once astounded and embarrassed, I could only stroke her shoulder with clumsy tenderness. For a moment she clung to me, trembling with silent grief. Then, raising her head and looking at me unashamedly through her tears, she challenged me:

"Dick! If I say *nothing—nothing*, mind you—will you leave Whern at once and for good?"

I suppose my sympathies were dulled with the emotions of the last few minutes. Cruelly and foolishly I ignored Mary as Mary, and replied to a girl of my own world who had hinted at the possibility of betrayal.

"I do not pay blackmail," I replied, and turned to leave her. But as I drew the curtain aside Barbara walked firmly into the alcove and faced the two of us.

"Still here, Mary? When does your round of information begin? It will save you trouble to omit my husband. He knows already. I have just told him."

"Barbara!"

She smiled at me with a possessive triumph that was disconcerting. She had the recklessness of a conspirator revealed, and her defiance to Mary was patently contrasted with tenderness to me. My hypermoderation shrank from the consequences of my own folly, and I blamed myself bitterly for having rejected what I now recognised for generosity in Mary. I had spurned her morality as prudery; now, faced with the converse, with an apparent exultation in wrongdoing, I was equally repelled.

Mary received Barbara's announcement with outward calm.

"In that case," she said, "the affair is ended. I am glad that I am relieved of any *direct* interposition."

And she left us.

"You *told Michael?*" I broke out. "And what did he say?"

As I spoke, I saw that her defiance was broken. Like a sumptuous flower that has begun to wilt, she drooped against the wall. Her fine, strong hands were pressed in anguish to her forehead. But there was no hint of tears. When she spoke it was in a voice dry and tired.

"That is the tragedy, Dick. He said nothing. At first he laughed and said you were always a

man of taste. But I implored him to be serious. It was *true*, I told him, *true*, *true!* And he sat and looked at me with a sort of wounded astonishment—like an animal—suddenly lashed by a kind owner—and then—then leant wearily on his hand and—I felt as though he had gone out of the room."

"God forgive me," I whispered.

For a few seconds we stood silently appalled at the disaster we had so fortuitously provoked. I pulled myself together.

"Sweetheart," I said, "Mary offered her silence in exchange for my departure. I refused, because I am rather proud of loving you and dizzily excited at your loving me. But I must clear out. When you come back from town I shall be gone—for that foreign holiday we discussed a while ago."

She looked at me, her sombre eyes dark with perplexity.

"Leave me? Dick, no! I cannot be left! What do you want of me? Take it! Take it and spoil it, but do not put it aside——"

"But Michael——?" I began.

She clasped and unclasped her tortured hands.

"Poor Michael! How cruel a choice to kill or to die oneself!" Then with a sudden gesture of despairing determination: "I will stay—if he wants me. You shall go—if you want to. . . ."

My resolution wavered.

"*Want* to? It will be the end of seeing and feeling."

"Michael——" She in her turn murmured the name and checked the tide of selfishness.

I clenched my fists in the effort of self-control. Waywardly a tag of verse fluttered against the

window of memory. "Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean!" Honour and misery against happiness, golden happiness, and—shame. Shame? In the world's eyes, perhaps; love admits no social vetoes. "Pale Galilean." How it suited Michael! At the last, breeding with its innate love of gesture, its involuntary distrust of selfishness, conquered desire.

"I will go and see him," I said.

2.

When I entered the library Michael was in his favourite attitude against the mantelpiece, shoulders hunched, hands in trouser pockets. He looked up, but said nothing, nor did the set melancholy of his face alter in any way. I began at once:

"I have not come to defy nor to apologise. I suppose I am a blackguard, but that you are probably aware of already. I hope to-morrow's move to town will proceed as usual. When you return here, I shall be gone. All will be in order. Do you approve?"

He had withdrawn one hand from its pocket and was playing with his watch-chain. His head drooped, and I could see only the sparse, fair hair, scrupulously parted, and the pale crescent of his foreshortened brow.

"It is all very difficult," he said quietly, so quietly that one would suppose he were merely continuing an interrupted discussion. "I do not see my way. I have failed her somehow. And yet I love her, Dick—sometimes to my own shame. But I have failed her, and she, naturally, turns

elsewhere. Ideally I ought to say to you, 'Take her.' It would break my heart, but I *could* do it—and *should* do it but for—— Is it cowardly, Dick? I have worked so hard to remove the stain from Whern, and another scandal now . . . All for nothing. I cannot sacrifice my work." Then with a spurt of anger: "I *will* not sacrifice my work. There must be no scandal."

"Of course not," I broke in. "And for that reason alone I must go."

But once more the attenuated violence of an ancient race failed and broke. Anger left him, and, with the fatal ease of the over-complex, he was considering once again the point of view of the enemy.

"But it would be wanton cruelty to crush her happiness. She has had so little. At first a satyr, then—a stick." He smiled with such bitterness of misery that, for all its treachery, my heart ached for him. "A stick," he repeated. "That is what she thinks. She is so warm and generous. She would make a great sinner, Dick. And yet connivance . . . It is not easy to bring oneself . . ."

"Michael! For God's sake!"

This trifling with detachment filled me with horror. Again one half of me reacted from the undeserved opportunities presented to the other half. Michael could have found no better way of killing my guilty passion than by this cool attitude of acceptance. He raised a hand at my interruption.

"One moment. I am only clear on one thing. There must be no scandal. Personally, I do not count. A man who cannot hold his wife deserves to lose her. But as head of the family I can order

its goings. Will it not be scandalous if you leave home? If I press you to stay, you will say the temptation is too great. Yield to it, then! I have every confidence in your discretion."

In growing astonishment and discomfort I had stepped backwards to the door. Was he doing this as a refinement of cruelty? But there was no gleam either of triumph or malice in his quietly puzzled eyes.

"On the whole, I am sure that is the best plan. I shall not like it; no man could. But perhaps it is my duty to Whern—and to Barbara. . . ."

Turning quickly against the mantel he buried his head in his arms. The door once closed between us, I paused uncertainly on the edge of the gleaming floor of the hall. It was getting late. The house was very still. A wish to see Barbara took me fiercely by the throat. She was no longer in the alcove. The drawing-room was in darkness. Half unconsciously I walked upstairs and down the western gallery. At her door I stood a moment, then knocked.

"Come in!"

She was in a low chair by the fire. Her hair swirled like a moorland stream over her shoulders. She wore a long, yellow dressing-gown, and her feet were bare.

"Come in, Dick," she said. "I was expecting you. What happened?"

Crossing the room I stood against the fireplace looking down on her. She raised her arms behind her head and lay back in the chair.

"What happened?" she repeated.

The beauty of her thawed the chill of uncertainty that had closed round my heart. For a moment I grasped eagerly at the implication of Michael's fantastic offer. But as I began to speak, there crept over me again a faint disgust.

"He blames himself," I said hurriedly. "Wishes for your happiness. But insists there should be no scandal and that my going would cause one."

"Well?"

"So he proposes—at least I understood . . . It is not credible. . . ."

"To let things take their course, I suppose? That is like Michael."

Her voice had become suddenly luscious. There is no other word. As she spoke she stretched lazily and the dressing-gown fell open. A low white bodice showed the dark cream of her throat and the shadowy division of her breasts. With head tilted back, she watched me with drooping lids. "How modern it all is!" she murmured. And then "Come to me, Richard. . . ."

I felt my whole body tremble. Gazing at her loveliness I felt a thirst that only her kisses could assuage. I longed to bury my face in her bosom, to kiss her shoulder and throat and lips, to close with kisses those smouldering eyes. But I could not move. The next instant the old faint disgust dried my mouth and sent a shiver down my spine.

"It is all spoilt," I said, "all spoilt now."

She literally sprang from her chair. "Spoilt!" she cried. "Am I fat or ugly? What is spoilt?"

Her anger filled me with humility.

"Darling," I whispered, "you are the loveliest

thing that ever was and I am always and ceaselessly your lover. But I cannot take you like this—on lease."

"You are afraid," she said contemptuously. "Or else you have such conceit that only the forbidden is desirable."

I stood with bowed head. Perhaps she was right; perhaps my love was vanity and its desire only self-flattery. Nevertheless, I knew it was not so.

"You are right to be angry. I seem to have insulted you. But I have not, Barbara. Love must not be hideous and furtive."

"Then it is cowardice. You have been described before, I believe, as 'not all of a man.' Why do you not take me away, if you will not *rent* me from your brother?"

Her cruel misuse of my own metaphor and of the borrowed taunt hurt me savagely. I wrenched my mind to a new angle.

"I will take you," I said. "We will go to-morrow."

"No, thank you," she answered. "I am quite comfortable here."

With elaborate indifference she sat down again and took a cigarette from the box at her side. As I did not move, she threw a careless glance in my direction.

"Good-night. I am hardly dressed for visitors. And after all this is my bedroom."

So everything is finished, I thought miserably, and stumbled to my own room. But why matters had fallen out so twistedly and where was my fault and where hers, not hours of sleeplessness and pondering could determine.

CHAPTER X

1.

I HAD been three weeks in the low, white hotel beside the idle sea. The sun had blazed indifferently from languid dawn to passionate brooding dusk. It was all very lovely with the hateful, empty loveliness of southern exile, and I believed I longed so much for London sleet and the gleam of the Circus lights on mud and hurrying revellers as for the more personal elements of the life that I had left. Then Barbara wrote:

"Dick dear, I was just somebody else. Forget it all and come back. The whole business is over and done with. Michael is asking for you."

With the opening of a door of release, the glitter of my surroundings became doubly tawdry, and I realised how I hated blue water and blinding dusty roads and the vivid colouring of fabulous flowers. For my last evening I sought amusement among the other guests, courted instead of fled their company, reckless of indiscretion or discourtesy or habitual reserve. The poisonous little woman with bulging eyes and a skin like parsley soup tried me on freedom and the nobler life.

"Youth," she said, "is nature's master. Until youth defies age and cramping beliefs and strikes off across the world towards an untrammelled destiny there can be no beauty and no love."

"You people talk," I replied, "as though all youth were golden and beautiful and all age cruel and horrible. But I know many young men and women both fanatical and plain and many old ones both tolerant and gracious."

"Bodily beauty is nothing," she retorted.

"Could I agree, I should be consoled. Perhaps I am degenerate or unready for the gospel, but give me the pretty girl every time."

She left me. I suppose the conviction that a radiant soul can transpire an ill-thriven body and a mean or empty face is as comforting as any other. It seems to be cherished usually by the ill favoured.

The next moment I heard a voice:

"Is it not Mr. Braden?"

The face was dimly familiar; the long, thrawn body more so; the feet in old brown sand-shoes most of all.

"Of course!" I said. "Mr. Moffat! Why did you never come to see me?"

"I did," he replied. "But not for a long while. I had other things to do. When I chanced a call you had left the address you gave me."

"Come and sit down," I said. I ordered drinks and explained my disappearance from Fitzroy Square. "And what are you doing?"

He shot me a suspicious glance, and I saw that an idle question had been taken for curiosity. Perversely I now wished for the answer. To encourage him I set an example.

"I am here," I said, "as an exile. There was trouble in England and someone had to go. So I went."

He gleamed with interest.

"Was it——?" he muttered.

"It was," I replied solemnly, wholly innocent either of his meaning or of my own.

"I have just come from Zurich," he went on, "and go to Naples after a few days. There is business in Marseilles. . . . The tide is rising."

"Capital!" I said brightly. "Capital!"

He was fingering his glass nervously, and I could see the long fingers stained with nicotine whiten and grow dark again as he tightened and relaxed his grip on the smooth surface.

"You were going to tell me"—I began—"or rather you would perhaps have told me, had I been still at my rooms when you called, what you and your friends are going to do about—well, about us."

"About you?"

"Yes—all my lot. My sister's lot."

He sneered.

"I was too busy over trifles in those days."

"And now?"

"I am not a simpleton, Mr. Braden. You were fair to me that night in London and I respect your intelligence, but I am not merciful."

The evident belief that I was currying favour with the future tickled me.

"Why did you speak to me just now?"

"Who knows? I have nothing against you. Perhaps I was anxious to see how you had progressed."

"I am the merest neophyte," I said humbly. "But it is not bad to have had to leave England."

Once again that gleam of involuntary interest.

"Tell me what happened."

I shook my head.

"I am not a simpleton, Mr. Moffat."

He smiled unpleasantly and drained his glass.

"Another?" he queried.

"If you choose to pay for it," I said, "I shall be delighted. The coming of equality will at least set a balance to treating."

He did not speak again until the replenished glasses were at hand. Then he peered solemnly into my eyes.

"Seriously . . ." he began.

I nodded.

"This is not chatter. I know. There is going to be trouble for you and your sort."

"It won't be the first," I replied.

"No—but it will be the last!" His ferocity startled me into something like curiosity. As once before, I wanted to learn more of the strange, angry man.

"What is your grudge against Society?" I asked.

He seemed genuinely surprised, and it was a different being that answered in bland astonishment:

"Grudge? I have no grudge—no personal grudge."

And I realised that I was talking to a genuine and fanatical idealist, a type that did not exist in my experience, and a type, therefore, that I considered did not exist at all. Characteristically—for I

have a mundane and practical mind—my interest faded before the possibility of rhetorical theory. Moffat was suddenly an illimitable bore. A terror seized me that he would start on Marx. I decided to liquidate.

"As we are on different sides," I said emphatically, "I shall not wish you luck. I merely warn you that trumpets these days are not enough to down the walls of Jericho."

"If the walls are obstinate, Mr. Braden, there are other weapons."

I got up.

"All right. So long as you are prepared. Are you a Christian?"

He snorted.

"I am not," he replied angrily.

"Then I will not quote Scripture to you. You might think I had invented it. But there are points about humility and gentleness . . ."

"Why do you close your ears?" he cried. "Have the poor been treated with gentleness? Have the rich showed humility? Was your sister humble and kind that night in London? And you talk to me of Christ!"

For a moment I stood looking down at him, at his black, untidy hair, and the dark, lined face with its flashing eyes. As I looked I felt, as keenly as one of my cool and critical mind can ever feel, the lure of righteous anger. He was right; morally and philosophically he was right. My aloofness was a meaner, more diluted emotionalism, a protective wall between cold truth and the

romantic fancies of a sheltered intellect. And yet . . .

"I understand," I said slowly. "And I sympathise. But if it comes to blows we shall be on different sides."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Inevitably. Even if you wished it we should shut you out. You belong to the other lot, and always must. But I am a little sorry."

"Don't be that," I said. "Only victors can afford regrets, and you have not won yet. Good-night."

"Good-night," he replied. "Make hay while the sun shines."

2.

Moffat's parting words recurred amusingly to my mind as the boat train, two days later, groped through a foggy drizzle to Charing Cross. Some weedy Italianate women with pince-nez and superfluous veils were my neighbours in the Pullman.

"Ugh! And to think that only on Wednesday we were barsking in that larvely sunshine!"

"What a climate!"

They exchanged miseries for so long and with such penetrating gusto that I rashly intervened.

"I once knew a man who preferred London and slush to any place or any weather."

"Warse he a mudguard maker?" asked one of the women. Which disposed of me for the time being, and deservedly, for forgetting how often a dry skin means a dry humour.

I taxied to the address in Cadogan Square from

which Barbara had written and found a comfortable house, full of good English lacquer. Levitt received me cordially. Her ladyship was out, but Miss Monica was in the boudoir. She was; and wearing a light wrap over next to nothing. Clothes of every kind strewed the sofas and chairs.

"Lord, Dick!" she cried. "How you do force your way in! I'm as naked as Eve. Go away."

"Don't mind me," I said. "I've just come from the south on purpose to get you a wedding present. What about a Jaeger sleeping-suit?"

"Would that knock Buda?"

"It would. Also very handy in case of sudden callers. Where's Hunyadi?"

"Dick, you are awful. Poor Pützschen! He's playing bridge somewhere, I believe. I stayed in to—well, you see . . . Incidentally, if you are set on a wedding present, there's an adorable clock at Welsenheimer's."

"Good," I said. "That's settled. Now what's the news?"

She stretched revealingly.

"News? Barbara seems to have had a tiff with the chief and made it up again. They're as chirpy as anything now. And he's to be an Under-Secretary when the Tories come in."

"Are they going to?" I asked, mindful of Moffat.

"God knows! In Hungary we never let them go out. It's so much simpler."

"'*We*' already?"

She threw a cushion at me, and then, glancing at the watch on her wrist, rang the bell.

"Valerie, I have to be at the Berkeley in an hour. Why didn't you say it was so late? I'll wear the gold and blue, and I want a bath. Clear off all this rubbish. So long, Richie. I'm going to Covent Garden with the Lambournes. Blow in during the interval if you're down town."

Alone, I smoked cigarettes and one after another picked up the books that lay about on the tables. The air in the room was warm and faintly scented with flowers and femininity; behind the curtains of the window London breathed deliciously. Everything was muted and luxurious, but not London nor this discreet opulence could compensate for the want of familiar things. I wanted Whern and the people I knew, and—more than anything—Barbara. But there was no Barbara here; the very room was wrongly keyed. Once more I wandered aimlessly from place to place. I read the evening paper and strewed it on the floor. I played half a waltz on the piano. Suddenly a telephone whirred. I found the instrument in a distant recess, and at the first sound of the voice became again content and purposeful.

"Yes, it is really me."

. . . .

"Oh, about an hour ago. When will you be back?"

. . . .

"Naturally, if you are."

. . . .

"Sorry, I forgot."

. . . .

"Monica was here; she's dining out for the opera."

. . . .

"And you refused? Why?"

. . . .

"*Now*, who is forgetting?"

. . . .

"Splendid. Don't be long."

Ringing off, I went to dress for dinner.

* * * * *

We were alone, she and I, with the pleasant formality of other folks' possessions handled by our own servants.

"You are looking well," I said politely.

"I am; very well. How does London seem after the Midi?"

I laughed.

"For Heaven's sake! One of us will say things are seasonable in a minute."

She smiled with tranquil indifference. How quietly friendly it all was! Dinner moved imperceptibly to its close.

"You are not inquisitive, Dick. All kinds of adventures might have befallen us in your absence, and you never ask."

"Monica said there was no news, except that Michael would be a Cabinet Minister in five hundred years."

"Poor darling! He's more likely to be cockshy for Jacobins. This Rodbury affair . . ."

I looked interrogation.

"The strike . . ."

"What strike?"

"Bless the innocent! He knows nothing. Hadn't you heard of the railway row? All about those slum houses?"

I listened to her disjointed and somewhat vague account of the trouble at Rodbury. Although no demolition was planned for several months, a curious agitation had been started in favour of provision for the future. Matters had come to an actual strike. The yards had now been out nearly three days, and there had been speeches against Michael worded with significant violence. Indeed, the strike was in essence anti-Whern. The company were clearly disinclined to any step likely to transfer the enmity of their employees to themselves. In response to demands for house accommodation they returned conciliatory optimism coupled with a discreet reference to obstructive landowners. An unusual state of affairs was evolving; one in which the parties technically at war were slowly drawing together against a third antagonist, ostensibly unconcerned in the matter, but with increasing frequency dragged in by inference or by name.

"Has Michael done anything?" I asked.

She shook her head.

"He's horribly busy, and, besides, what could he do? It's not his business. He sold the land and the company bought it."

"Terrible affair," I commented lightly, and put the matter from my mind, being uninterested in social problems except in so far as they affected myself.

Upstairs over coffee we became more personal.

"What made you write?" I asked.

If I counted on embarrassment or tenderness, or even reproof, I was disappointed. Barbara remained pleasantly suave.

"I've wanted your company, my dear. Also the wedding is next week."

"Nonsense," I retorted crossly. "Don't put me off. I want to know what you've said to Michael."

She gave a slight shrug, and her hands gestured mild impatience.

"Why not leave things alone? Surely this passion for wound-probing . . . I said the whole business was over. So it is. Let's leave it at that."

I stared at her in perplexity. She could manipulate the internal lighting of her face with disquieting adroitness. The façade was familiar; the broad, white forehead, the strong, straight eyebrows, the firmly generous lips. But there was no welcome in the eyes, and the full graciousness of her was now only admirable where before it had the lure of intimate prodigality. I felt the soreness of injured dignity, and all the more keenly because I had betrayed my own case by returning home at all. Clearly I was unlucky in love; women played with the idea of me and then—— Cripples cannot be choosers.

"I thought of looking in at Covent Garden," I said. "Will you come?"

She shook her head and looked at me whimsically.

A smile was hovering behind the grave curtain of her eyes. I lost a fragment of my temper.

"At least spare me your mockery! Surely I am ridiculous enough to amuse in retrospect? Save the joke for my absence."

I am afraid I shut the door with unnecessary noise.

Five minutes later, as I crossed the hall to go out, a key rattled in the latch of the outer door and Michael came in. He looked tired, and even paler than usual. When he saw me his face kindled to pleased surprise.

"It's Dick!" he cried. "When did you arrive? Is Barbara in?"

I followed him to his study. He mixed himself a drink and lay back in a long chair with a sigh of weariness.

"You look done up," I said, and the comment was not mere formalism.

"I'm worried about this business at Rodbury. They've camped in those fields near Leggatt's farm and the old man is furious. I suppose I must go down."

"What to do?"

"Turn them out, of course."

"But really, Michael——! What is Glenny for?"

"Glenny is in a blue funk. He wired to me this evening for instructions. Pack of rotters they seem to be down there. It's very awkward. I've got a deputation to-morrow morning, and there's an important debate to-morrow night."

"I'll go," I said on a sudden impulse. "After all, it's my job. I should never have left my post."

He glanced up at me.

"Will you? That would be splendid. I shall be most grateful. I'll come on Friday if it's essential. But use your own judgment. You have a free hand."

"Then, in case I don't see you to-morrow morning—farewell," I said, moving to the door. "I expect I'll be in late. The Lambournes and Monica will be supping somewhere."

"Good-night," he replied.

3.

I have always valued luxury in theatre-going. On that first evening after exile the soft darkness of the Lambourne's box held in its secret folds the essence of opulent and gracious London which, in my torrid solitude abroad, I had so restlessly desired. The second act was in progress, and, as I pushed open the door, I saw against the hot glow of the still invisible stage Monica's head with its turban and plume, and the faint mistiness of Delia Lambourne's flaxen curls. A glimmer of shirt-front to my left betrayed Lambourne himself, stocky, a little bored. I leant against the wall and allowed the music to run like caressing water over my relaxed contentment. I was glad of my host's taciturnity, of my hostess's genuine love of music. Impersonality and silence, high above the breathing trough of a crowded house—these to my home-longing meant perfect satiety.

The interval brought an unexpected message. "Lady Whern has telephoned that she will join

Lady Lambourne at supper. If not at the Savoy, would Lady Lambourne send word."

"How nice!" said Delia in her friendly way. "Dear Barbara. She knew we wanted her so much. No, it's quite all right" (to the attendant). "There's no message, thank you."

At the Savoy we found Barbara and Koloszvary drinking soda-water. Delia fluttered forward.

"Dear things. How sweet of you to come! What on earth is that dangerous bottle?"

"We were so hungry," pouted Barbara, "and the young man found me a wretched substitute for Monica. So we thought a little dissipation . . . Did you have a good show?"

Supper progressed uneventfully. Then Monica yawned.

"The child is sleepy," said Delia. "Count Koloszvary must take her home. Good-night, darling. How lovely you look in that dress! I wish I had your shoulders."

Inevitably Monica's shoulders became a subject of inspection (to which, incidentally, she readily lent herself), and I noticed a faint gleam in Putzi's eyes. What a low lot men are, I thought, because I understood the gleam and sympathised with it and hated myself for doing so.

The fiancés disappeared. We sat a while longer and then drifted towards the door. As she got into the car Barbara said:

"Dick, tell him to drive towards Richmond and then back. I want to talk to you."

I obeyed, and, getting in beside her, waited for enlightenment.

"You saw Michael to-night?" she began.

"I did."

"What about these squatters?"

"I'm going down to-morrow."

"To do what?"

"Well," with a laugh, "that's the trouble. What shall I do? Have you any suggestions?"

She did not reply at once, but sat staring away from me out of the window of the car. Against the sliding background of dark houses and pale, hurrying faces, I saw her frown in perplexity.

"I suppose I'd better tell you," she said at last. "Do you remember at Whern last Christmas Mary trying to start a row with me about my promises to Verney? Michael treated the affair as he treats every fragment of bad breeding—he just brushed it aside, and it was never mentioned again. But there was something in what Mary said. I did promise things, and—and this outbreak is the result."

"Go on," I said.

She turned to me quickly and laid her hand on my knee.

"Dick, don't *you* be stern with me! You said that like Michael. Mayn't I finish?"

"Dear child, haven't I begged you to do so?"

"You're being horrid, Dick. I wish I'd never begun. And I counted on your help. That's why I came to the Savoy. To talk to you."

This inconsequence annoyed me. Barbara was

not an eighteen-year-old, to play the wayward feminine.

"'Oh, for God's sake get on!" I said crossly.

For answer she took the speaking-tube and bade the chauffeur drive home after all. In despair I sat back into my corner and cursed the moods of women. She only spoke as we were mounting the house steps.

"You're going by train, I suppose?"

"Yes. Ten-thirty, I think. I'll telephone Glenny to meet me."

4.

The agent was on Laylham platform as the train stopped. He greeted me politely, and we walked together towards the roadway.

"I had not understood," he began a little awkwardly, "that Lady Whern would also be coming to-day. It confused matters a little. When I got your message——"

I interrupted him.

"What time did Lady Whern arrive?"

"She came on the early train. Of course, there was no conveyance here. I did not know . . . I am very sorry there should have been a muddle."

I said nothing, and moved towards the station exit once again. Glenny edged along by my side, seemingly reluctant to leave the platform.

"Lady Whern asked me to tell you she would be here directly, and would you wait for her."

"Will you wait as well?"

"If you will excuse me, Mr. Braden, I ought to

get off. Lady Whern told me I should lose no time in seeing Mr. Verney's committee, and I understand they are meeting in Rodbury in an hour."

"All right," I said. "Don't wait on my account. I'll go over and talk to Mrs. Purcell at the inn."

We shook hands and separated. I made no attempt to forecast what had happened. There would be explanation and to spare when Barbara arrived. In the meantime Mrs. Purcell was an old friend and a cheery soul, and a glass of her excellent ale would help towards a desirable placidity of mind.

It was nearly half an hour later that a car swished past the window and jerked to a standstill at the station entrance. Barbara was driving. She jumped out and hurried into the booking-office. I watched from the inn parlour and continued my conversation with the landlady. Naturally it concerned the strike, and her sympathies were with Michael. As she poured forth her scorn of the good-for-nothings who were driving old Farmer Leggatt to madness, I kept my eye on the station door. Barbara emerged and hurried towards the inn. The next minute she was on the threshold of the parlour.

"Come on, Dick. There's no time to lose. Why didn't you show yourself before? (Good-morning, Mrs. Purcell. . . . Yes, very nice, but rather cold.) You must have seen me."

"I saw you," I said. "And a very nice sight it was."

She frowned impatiently, and tapped with her foot on the floor.

"Are you coming?"

Leisurely I paid for my beer and took leave of Mrs. Purcell.

"Where are we going?" I asked mildly.

"Rodbury—to see Verney."

"What a pleasure! I gather Glenny is there already. May I be told the position? It makes things easier, and I should like to look as small a fool as possible in the circumstances."

She laughed and patted my arm.

"Poor old thing," she said caressingly. "I treated you rather meanly. But you wouldn't listen last night——"

"Really, Barbara!" I broke in. "You are impossible! For Heaven's sake stop telling me about last night! I don't pretend to know what I did wrong, but I apologise and withdraw and climb down. Is that sufficient?"

"Tut, tut, Richard. I was trying for a rise. Jump in! Quick! Now that we're off, let's be serious. I had to give you the slip and get here first. I've settled it all."

I maintained a sceptical silence.

"Settled it, Richard. Do you hear?"

"Danegeld?" I queried.

"Partly. But that's not where you come in. As I tried to tell you yesterday, I had given myself away to Verney. Something had to be done. The present houses come down in September, and these wretched folk must be provided for. I see

Leggatt's objection to the present arrangement, and they will be off his land by to-morrow. I am going to make over that open space near Plaughton to the Rodbury Committee, and you have got to back me up."

I was speechless with astonishment at this outpouring of emotional amateurism. At the same time, I realised that behind the positive abbreviation of her manner, she concealed doubts and anxieties. For a few moments I watched the hedge-tops switchback beside the car and endeavoured to collect my faculties.

"I'm not sure if I quite understand, yet," I said at last. "Correct me if I am wrong, but I imagine the position to be this: Some while ago you promised Verney to embark on a housing scheme. He holds you to your promise——"

"One moment——"

"Don't interrupt. Let me finish. Verney insists on your doing what you undertook to do. Probably this demonstration is to force your hand. It has forced it. You are now buying off the demonstrators with (I assume) your own money and (you yourself admit) Michael's land. A few questions. When did you first make promises to Verney—before the sale?"

"Yes—some time before. When I first saw the condition those awful houses were in." She spoke now in a subdued voice, and her manner was as docile as it had previously been flippantly aggressive.

"It was you then, after all, that told him of the projected sale?"

She nodded.

"And you renewed your promises?"

"Not exactly. He hinted at them and, like a fool, I let his hints pass unchallenged."

"Now he organises this business, and"—here I looked at her pointedly—"lets you know indirectly that the remedy lies in your hands?"

Again she nodded. In that instant I had a flash of understanding.

"And that is why you wrote for me?"

"Dick," she murmured, "it was not only that . . ."

The diplomacy of that insinuation was unnecessary. Already I had told myself that her coldness and indifference of the day before were mere acting. She had sent for me to help her, and not because all that had passed had, as she made out, passed utterly. A gradual excitement took possession of my mind. It was an effort to keep attention on the matter of the moment.

"Finally," I said, "you talk of 'making over land' to Verney's committee. That means nothing. You cannot 'make over' someone else's land. Besides, this precious committee aren't builders."

"I only meant that I should like houses built there," she said humbly.

"By whom?"

"Anyone you like, Dick dear. I thought the committee would have some say in the matter."

"And who pays?"

"I do."

The car hummed on its way. It was a fine day

but cold, and I shivered a little as we rushed along the country road with its untidy grass borders and damp drifts of rotting leaves.

"You have got us into a nice corner, Barbara," I said at last.

"But wasn't I right? Isn't it up to us to do *something?* Surely you can advise Michael that this arrangement is the best plan? He only wants to be let alone. And that land was all gorse and rushes and sandpits. There's water and a high road. It's useless to us. . . ."

"I don't like it. It means lying to him."

She leant against me, and I saw the downy hair curling behind her ears. The heady scent of her rocked in my nostrils, and once more I was in the tall arched alcove off the great hall at Whern, with its groined roof and heavily drooping curtains, I saw her hands stretched forward to the wheel as on that evening they had drooped over her knees and drank colour from the crimson rug.

"Please, Dick," she whispered.

A devil prompted me to try a turn of the screw.

"You said the whole business was over. . . . Leave it at that. Why this passion for wound probing? . . ."

I threw all I knew of caressing irony into this quotation of her very words. But she turned on me eyes so large with sorrowful humility, so soft with tenderness, that I forgot everything except how much I loved her.

"Forgive me," I muttered. "You know I cannot refuse you anything."

The slow unfurling of her smile was ecstasy to see. She laid her left hand on mine and pressed it lightly.

"Nor I," she said.

To call our conspiracy a second treachery to Michael is to use too big a word. The merest disingenuity sufficed, for an honourable man is sickeningly easy to deceive. Nevertheless I am for some reason more unwilling to dwell on this trifling incident than on the greater fault that went before it. I see myself confronting Michael, outwardly nonchalant, at heart a thing of patches. The spiritual covering of convention and breeding was rent by a passion that shamed as it tore. I have my happiness now and, to keep it, would commit worse crimes than ever compassed its achievement, but even the attainment of desire cannot ennoble the means employed. If the affair of the Rodbury tenants had passed over less glibly, if what threatened a real significance had not petered out into a triviality doubly marked by lapse of time, I might find purpose in my falsity and skill in my lying. As it is, the thing ended with a calm simplicity, and the emotions of that motor drive have the absurdity of anticlimax.

Michael received my report with cold attention. I took care to stress the suspicious nature of the outbreak. "It is a prophetic strike," I said, "for something that is wanted six months hence." I then proceeded to outline the risks of ignoring the movement and the credit to be gained by a

timely gesture on the lines to which, poor man, he was already committed.

When I had finished—

"Am I expected to spend money on this scheme?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"And to whom will rents be paid?"

"To you and Barbara."

"In fact, it is profitable." He pondered in silence. "I don't like climbing down. They will say I was beaten."

"Surely they will praise your constructive philanthropy."

"It is hardly philanthropy as I understand it," he retorted brusquely. "I am asked to allow someone else to build houses on my waste land and then begged to receive payment in the form of rent. No, no, Dick. It's not sense. There's something behind it. Where's the catch?"

"You are too inquisitive," I said. "As a matter of fact the building money comes from Barbara. But it's a secret."

To my relief he laughed.

"Trying a little flutter on her own! Good luck to her! But she must have the rents—and the collecting of them. In that case, let her take the land and welcome. Why didn't she ask me?"

"Don't you see, Michael, she was not your representative; I was. Things might have been arrangeable another way and then this would not have arisen. As it fell out, I concluded there was only this solution possible and I told her my

opinion. She offered to finance the building on condition that I tackled you. That's all about it."

He shrugged his shoulders.

" Go ahead, then. So long as I'm not bothered. And many thanks for going down there."

5.

To the same bathos I attribute the uneventful history of the months that followed. A fruit, luscious when unattainable, drooped to my hand, and maybe my will to pluck was palsied with sudden scruple or the prize, once within reach, lost its lure. And yet neither the one nor the other. To talk of scruple at that eleventh hour was hypocrisy; to pretend coolness, clumsy falsehood. Wherefore I am driven to trace the temporary check in the current of my love to the flatness of the Rodbury crisis which levelled other things beside itself, and, among them, the pitch of the slope down which flowed Barbara's life and mine.

Monica was duly married and the illustrated Press broke into a fanfare of photographs, blather, and snobbery. She was " brilliant " and " beautiful " and " piquante " and " mondaine." Koloszvary was " gallant " and " handsome " and " wealthy," and of incredible racial antiquity. Those of us who could not avoid the honour were interviewed and snapshotted and presented to the world as mentally deficient and physically absurd. The only alleviation of an always tedious and sometimes intolerable experience was the misfortune that overtook poor Mary, who, grasping too eagerly

at the opportunity of airing her unusual views, unloaded on to a reporter of a mammoth paper such vitriolic opinions of the society that allowed him to exist at all that he, anxious to avenge himself and to please his proprietors, published over Mary's name the photograph of a spectacled female of Hebraic origin and headed his interview "Noblesse Oblige: Views of the Aristo of To-morrow."

The ceremony over we retired to Whern, until the calls of the season took Michael and Barbara to London once again. It is enough to say that we drifted into the usual idle round of automatic gaiety, as the last carnival of the old world ran its luxurious and heedless way.

CHAPTER XI

1.

To convert a purely personal chronicle into a commentary on England in war-time is within neither my intention nor my capacity. Many there are who give to their intimates and to themselves that insignificance in daily happenings that is proportionate and proper. I, to my shame, am different. Maybe because the Bradens have for long enough been persons of importance in their little world, it is instinctive in me to regard events in the light of my own experience and of the experience of my family. The calamity of August, 1914, and the years of anxiety, misery, anger, and pride that followed it, tested our very beings as they tested those of millions. We met the test in our several and different ways and the harmony and discord of these encounters are my story because they were for me the story of the war. I am not afraid of the charge of superiority. The critical faculty makes the onlooker; and the onlooker, to whom are afterwards the triumphs of victory, may at least claim the satisfaction of his vantage-point during the struggle. How I acquitted myself when, far on during the torment of war, I was dragged from my place of observation and called upon to make a strange and ironic choice, others shall judge; if

they will, that is—for the choice is made and there is no going back. For my part there are facts to be recorded and the final scenes in the tragi-comedy of Whern.

My first memory is of the great south terrace after dinner on the evening when, without hope of reprieve, we knew that the old world had been condemned to death. Over the wooded hills and out of the bland passivity of summer heat something foul but grandiose had been wafted into our paradise. To a few it was stimulus, and there were fevered faces and fevered brains among the party that strolled and sat in the luminous twilight of the August evening. The majority were gravely pale. Among the prophecies, laments, and exultations that fluttered along the silver dusk were two silences—those of Michael and of Barbara. He listened, immobile and expressionless, to the blustering optimism of General Lawlor, to the graceful timidity of Mercia Gledhowe, to Mary's angry clamour of proletarian veto. Barbara was differently aloof. An afternoon of hard-played tennis brought her to dinner radiant with exercise. Now, in the rosy fatigue of her perfect healthiness, she let no public happening disturb her serenity. I heard Agatha persecuting her detachment.

"Really, Barbara, you shock me! Lying there as bold as brass and all these dreadful things going on and Heaven alone knows what coming! But then, you were always so strong-minded. I'm a woman and not ashamed of it, whatever Richard may think. Yes, I see you"—turning to me—

" and the ' foolish little Agatha ' look in your nasty eyes ! Perhaps *you* can stir Barbara to some *sort* of interest in history !"

Barbara stretched in her long chair and gurgled happily:

" What *am* I to do, Agatha darling ? I'm so comfy, and my head is too thick for politics. I can't stop their old war, if I wanted to. Why fuss before one need ?"

Agatha threw out her hands.

" Fuss ! Hearken to her ! Fuss indeed ! I always think it a woman's proudest mission to dance before the conquering hero—though, to tell the truth, I'm not so slim as I was, and the prospect is a shade intimidating—but we must all do what in us lies. Mustn't we, Richard ?"

She shot the words at me as an afterthought, and I had a horrid vision of this idiotic, good-natured little woman spitted absurdly on a hostile bayonet. For a moment I felt that it would be like Agatha to meet a violent end—meet it trustfully and merrily. But the next instant I told myself that the fading of that perpetual babyhood was unthinkable.

" We must indeed, Agatha," I replied solemnly. " And your duty and mine is clearly to rouse Barbara to a sense of her responsibility. To-morrow, after breakfast, we will teach her to knit a tummy-band. Then you can go and rub up your eurhythmics, and I'll buy a trumpet."

" Dick is flippant," said Barbara lazily. " Is he overmoved or not moved at all ?"

"Guess," I replied, but she shook her head drowsily and gazed with tranquil eyes into the glimmering distance.

* * * * *

The next memory is Monica's return. A little tired about the eyes, but cool and fair and elegant, she metaphorically strolled into London a fortnight after war had been declared with the easy assurance of one accustomed to the foreign travel of a previous existence. "My dear! We'd given you up." "Was it very awful?" "How wonderful to get through!"

She had walked unannounced into the drawing-room at Cadogan Square, and the exclamations of assembled relatives sang like bullets past her head. I was not present, but Barbara told me afterwards that the languid disgust on Monica's face was that of a greyhound attacked by moths. "She brushed us out of her eyes, Dick, and asked for tea." Of course there was attitude in the composure, and after dinner we were given a few details of what must have been a sensational journey from the Black Forest to Rotterdam.

"Surely Switzerland would have been nearer?" asked Michael.

"Dear innocent! Don't you realise I am a Hungarian? The Germans did their best for me —the French would have been impossible. It's only thanks to that old lamb at The Hague that I got into England at all. The Entente is so dreadfully warlike."

Michael looked grave. He had forgotten his sister was an alien. She divined his thoughts.

"Do look at poor Micky! He thinks I'll disgrace him. Don't worry, dear brother; I'm not going to live here, and I'll be fearfully discreet. If I knew any German secrets I'd tell you them and perhaps they'd make you a field-marshal. But I don't."

"And the husband?" I asked, with a little diffidence.

"Fighting like a tiger, I expect," said Monica calmly. "I asked him not to fight England, but he seemed to think it might be unavoidable. So violent, all these battles. One never knows. Well, well, I must get a house and do the cloistered wife. Frightfully mediæval we are in Hungary. Tapestry and serfs and Lord knows what. I am surprised Putz didn't lock me up and keep the key like those people in Hewlett's books or the Decameron. . . . Think of it with the modern outline! . . . Do you like my dress, Barbara? Got it in Berlin coming through. It's genuine Viennese. . . ."

* * * * *

And then nothing for months, until from the dull unhappiness of increasing strain stand out the few vivid days of Anthony's first leave. The routine of war work was settling into its stride. Michael, in red tabs, worked early and late in secret magnificence for the General Staff; Barbara had committees and more committees; she had grown sullen and heavy-eyed, and I guessed at a rising resentment against this tyranny of fate under which our generation was blindly struggling.

Mary, whom we seldom saw, had plunged into pacificism, and emerged at long intervals, menacing and dogmatic, from obscure haunts of internationalist intrigue. I myself did the odd jobs that war leaves over for intelligent cripples who can afford to take honorary work. There are plenty. We slaved, all of us, to make thought impossible. Social gaiety became a speciality of the parvenu; and it was something of an effort properly to satisfy Anthony's desire for entertainment. For its poignancy and not for its detail, I remember that week of merry-making; indeed, I find it hard to say what actually occurred. The days flickered by, and into the darkness from which he had come Anthony vanished once more. At the door of the Pullman he fumbled in the pocket of his tunic.

"I say, old man, if—it's all my eye, of course, and I'll be as right as rain—but if anything happens just give this to Vi Stretton and tell her I'd be awfully grateful if she'd just freeze on to it. Beastly sorry to bore you with it. Sure you don't mind? Thanks awfully. Cheerio."

Even now I recall the heartache of that moment and the brave contrast between laughing mouth and sad violet eyes when two days later I met the girl herself. I say "even now," because nothing *did* happen to Anthony, and if he and Vi ever meet in these days it is as mere acquaintances. There were similar romances on most of Anthony's leaves, but of no one do I retain any memory, so erratic is my emotionalism and so out of tune with the monstrous realities of war.

After this the dun monotony of war-time lies for long enough unbroken and without landmark in my memory. Indeed, I recall nothing during the two years that followed that first winter and spring of shadows—nothing, that is, with significant bearing on the fate of our family. With the end of the two years came Michael's dinner party from which sprang such bitter consequence.

2.

It is necessary to explain that Monica, at the urgent advice of her friends and in deference to Michael's implied rather than spoken wish, had held to her decision not to live in London and had gone to Ireland on a protracted visit. Towards the end of 1916, however, her never exemplary patience gave out. One morning at my office a familiar voice on the telephone summoned me to lunch at the Savoy. Monica forestalled criticism.

"It's no earthly use, Richard. I will not stop in that dismal hole any longer. I'll call myself what you like, but henceforward it is London for little Isolde and *nowhere else.*"

I attempted remonstrance, but she waved me aside and began to chatter with her old brilliant flippancy.

"How's Tony?"

"He's got a staff job," I said. "Liaison with the French of some kind."

"Does he know any French now? He didn't."

"Not much," I admitted, "but probably it doesn't matter."

" All the same—chirpy little liaison it must be; a series of *nuits blanches*. Like St. What's-her-name and the thingummy."

To follow Monica into history or mythology was always rash. I changed the subject. Lunch flickered to an end.

" Now, you're coming along to agents to impress them with my respectability."

I shrugged my shoulders and took the afternoon to help her house-hunt.

Once established in a pleasant flat near Victoria, " Monica Braden " was not long in remaking her old mark on the London that formerly had known her well. Under the seasonable guise of war charities, canteen concerts, officers' club celebrations, she resumed with all her old vigour the life of excitement and shrill gaiety that she loved. Of course, the key was lower; but the melody was restless as ever, restless and penetrating. Gradually it began to attract unfavourable notice. There was a court-martial case that teased newspaper curiosity and a reference to the " irresponsibility of selfish women " lodged itself like irritant grit in the cogwheels of the Yellow Press. They screeched noisily. Allusions became frequent. Then, in some idiot revue, the song success had a refrain beginning: " Moni-caa from Mona-coe ! . . . People detected an inference more deliberate than was originally intended, but the librettist, in a catchpenny moment, added a verse which outgossiped gossip. It happened that Michael, after a semi-official dinner, was taken by several brother

officers to the last hour of this very show. They entered the theatre as the song was in progress, and the proudest Braden of them all had the cruel mortification of hearing an only too palpable insult to his sister, screamed in ragtime by a strident female whose private connection with the aristocracy was a commonplace (to within a fiver of the actual amount) in every London club. Charlie Easterham was with him and, noticing his disgusted stupor, had the wit to warn me by telephone immediately the performance ended.

"He's taken it damned hard, Braden," said the kindly fellow over the line. "Give an eye to him when he gets in. Why the hell was I such a fool as to forget the song was in that show? Always was a silly ass. Remember I said nothing. Good-bye."

Michael was dead pale when he came home. I heard his key and hurried to intercept him. It had been an half-hour of quick thinking. I remembered Monica's words: "I never bend, Dick; I break." And Michael's, on the occasion of that fantastic interview in the study at Whern: "I have worked so hard to remove the stain from Whern, and another scandal now . . . As head of the family I can order its goings." Well then, he should have the chance. I would forestall his criticism with my own.

"Come and talk a bit, Michael," I said. "I never see you nowadays and I have something to say. You look dead beat. Do you good to have a change of subject."

The hypocrisy succeeded. He followed me quietly to the study.

"It's Monica I'm bothered about," I began, and ignored the flickering glance that reached me from under his tired, drooping lids. "She's playing the fool because she feels on the loose, and perhaps a little because she thinks the ice is a bit thin. You see? One increases speed. It's not fair on her or on us. It's unfair to you most of all. Would it not be possible to bring her in more, to give her the support of the family rein downhill, and—er—the check of the family bit on the level? She's in a difficult position, and is the last person to use caution or to know when there is danger!"

He compressed his lips and brooded at the floor. Then, with one of his rapid looks:

"You've heard it too, perhaps?"

"Heard it? What? Gossip, you mean?"

He shrugged wearily and, to my joy, decided I was too uninstructed to deserve enlightenment.

"Oh, nothing. It doesn't matter. This plan of yours, however . . . What do you actually suggest?"

I thought a minute or two.

"Well—as a start—could you do a little entertaining and—and have her here? Besides," warming to my speech, "you are overworking. Barbara is worried. It would be so much better to be at home more regularly for dinner, to see people . . ."

He smiled his contemptuous smile.

"As you like, brother. I'll give it a trial, any-

way. A piece of paper—— Thank you. We will make out a few lists of dinner guests."

And that was the origin of the dinner-party. That the idea was mine is perhaps my most tragic memory. And I meant so well. The party was not a large one, but it represented the inner ring of administration. Naturally talk was all of the war and of the political crisis. With the exception of Monica, the women were well known to each other and to the men present as of the world that regards its very dreams as confidential. As for Monica she was accepted as Whern's sister, and her recent notoriety had not reached the ears of those people who, being newspaper copy in themselves, never read the lighter Press at all. Consequently, with the withdrawal of the servants, there was little check on conversation. Policy—naval, military, and political—was freely discussed. As stimulus and for the interest of its talk the evening was an undeniable success.

Not a fortnight later came the catastrophe. A man I knew well—an official high up in the Postal Censorship—telephoned me to go and see him. In his high, light room near Lincoln's Inn Fields I found him pacing with anxious urgency the spotted carpet supplied to civil servants of a certain eminence.

"Braden," he broke out, as soon as the door was shut, "something rotten has happened; something I'd give any money to know nothing of at all. Read that."

He handed me a buff file. It contained two

sheets of minute paper covered with various comments, and—I nearly dropped the file on the floor in my astonishment—eight sides of Monica's lilac notepaper filled with her unmistakable handwriting. My friend continued to pace the floor. I read the letter; I read the minutes. Then I placed the file on the table and stood with the awful feeling that the bottom had just fallen out of the world. For the letter, which was written in German, began "Allerliebstes Pützschen," and detailed with vivid accuracy the conversation of that fatal party. The envelope, tagged with the other papers of the file, bore an English stamp with a London postmark, and was addressed to a Fräulein Loosli in Aargau. But it was a detail of one of the minutes (in themselves they were all purely official commentary on this terrible enclosure) that completed my despair, for there I read the signature of the examiner who had opened the letter, and that examiner was Moffat.

One gleam of hope remained. The signature was an illegible scrawl that only my intimacy could interpret as "Nishka," the writer's pet name of the moment. There was no address on the paper. Maybe identification could be baulked. But then my presence in the matter was unexplained. Why was I sent for? Just possibly as Michael's brother; just conceivably as an unofficial channel to the man at whose house the indiscretion had come into being, for there were indications in the letter. . . .

Merrick was now staring out of the window, and

I challenged his unhappy back for guidance in my dilemma. As I watched him, hope faded. Clearly a personal connection had been traced; he would not stand thus miserably embarrassed in the presence of a colleague; I was here as his friend and as brother to one guilty of——

"Is there anything further?" I asked.

He turned abruptly, and his eyes were heavy with distress.

"Yes," he said slowly. "I'm sorrier than I can say, Braden. There is this private note from the head of the subsection."

From the buff envelope I drew two sheets of official paper.

"Mr. Merrick,

"Examiner 791 has requested me to bring to your personal notice the enclosed minute prepared by him and dealing with E/4623/25. I have nothing to add.

"H. Winthrop, D.A.C."

The first glimpse of the second sheet all but upset once more my hardly regained control, for I recognised Moffat's writing. I read as follows:

"Mr. Winthrop,

"With reference to E/4623/25 addressed to Fräulein Loosli, Aargau, I happened through private knowledge to possess a clue to the writer. I have made enquiries, and suggest that official investigation be directed towards No. —, Ashley Gardens. The flat is let furnished to a lady whose husband is fighting with the Hungarian Army.

Her real name is the Countess Koloszvary, although she is at present using her maiden name, and is well known in Society as the Hon. Monica Braden. May I ask you to bring this information personally to the notice of Mr. Merrick ? For obvious reasons I am not attaching it to the other papers.

" B. MOFFAT (*Examiner* 791)."

Perhaps the thought of the man's triumphant smile as he wrote these lines braced me to meet calamity. I felt a sudden pity for Merrick in his cruel quandary, but of personal embarrassment or confusion no atom remained.

" Well, Merrick "—he started, and I suppose my tone was almost brisk—" and what next ?"

" Is it true ?" he asked hoarsely. " Is what that fellow writes possible ?"

My pity increased. The poor man was stricken to the heart, while I, whom the matter concerned so nearly, was coldly practical.

" It's perfectly true," I replied gently. " The writing is unmistakable. Also I recognise the source from which the information came. It was splendid of you to let me see this; I am—we shall all be—most grateful." Then, after a moment's pause: " I suppose the file—and this minute—go forward to-day ?"

" They *must*," he muttered. " If I could lose them, I would. If the whole place were burnt in the night, I'd be silly with joy. But they *must* go on; nothing is lost here. I have kept them two days. I can keep them till to-morrow, but not

longer. It is up to you to see that nothing gets out."

I nodded slowly and doubtfully.

"I must try," I said, and took up my hat. "Good-bye, Merrick. Once more, thank you a thousand times. I suppose war is meant for the mortification of the individual. I'll let you know what happens our end. Perhaps you could—— ?"

"Of course," he said gruffly. "Good-bye."

In the street I stood and pondered my next move. Influence in favour of secrecy could be exerted without difficulty; I was not afraid of galling publicity from the side of the high officials. Michael was too good a colleague not to deserve every consideration. But there were dangerous complications. Moffat, for instance . . . I had not forgotten his bitterness. Was he the man to lose an opportunity for revenge? He had had ample provocation, and in such moods the Official Secrets Act was mere formalism. Also, there were methods of evasion that involved no breach of faith. And then Monica herself. Why, in God's name, had she committed this sudden folly? Or was it not so sudden? I caught my breath. What proof was there that she had not done this before? With a sudden grimness I determined that at least she should not do it again. Calling a taxi, I drove to Ashley Gardens.

It was nearly one o'clock, and Monica was dressing to go out to lunch. In response to my urgent message she came into the drawing-room

with her hat in one hand, her sunshade and gloves in the other.

"You seem in great fuss, Dick," she remarked amiably. "I've got to go out in a second. What's up?"

In the taxi I had rehearsed a dozen ways of broaching the subject. Now that the moment had arrived I forgot them all. She was so cool and serene and beautiful that the whole story seemed melodrama, and I myself an actor condemned to play a sensational part in the crude daylight of normal existence. Momentarily dumb, I stood and regarded her vacantly. She frowned with impatient perplexity, but must have guessed that I was not merely fooling, for her voice, when she spoke, had a forced note in its levity.

"Well? For Heaven's sake, man, don't glare at me like that! 'Mr. Braden *must* see you, miss.' Here I am. Is this merely the search for the picturesque? Am I a peepshow, or is it a bet?"

With an effort I decided on the line to follow.

"It is this," I said gravely. "There is going to be trouble, and you'll be in it to the neck. I have come to warn you *not to be!* Do you understand? The only chance for you and for all of us is to tell the truth. In return for the warning I should like to ask one question——"

Her bewilderment was certainly genuine.

"The man's mad!" she said. "My dear Richard, what in God's name are you talking about?"

"I have just read a letter from you to your

husband, and I was in the Postal Censor's office when I read it. 'Fräulein Loosli!' Upon my word, Monica, I couldn't believe you capable of such idiocy. Haven't you realised——"

The change in her face silenced me. The eyes glowed with a curious bitter flame; the mouth tightened, as Michael's so often did, into a thin, straight line. Slowly the colour faded from her cheeks. Then, with a little wriggle of her shoulders, she threw back her head.

"I should worry!" she said defiantly. Turning away, she threw her hat on to the sofa and walked nervously towards her open bureau. From the pigeon-holes I could see protruding sheets of that accursed lilac notepaper. She spoke again, and her back was turned towards me.

"Postal Censorship? How curious! 'Somebody blundered,' as the poet says. You may well think me mad. Never mind, others will think worse of me than that. Let them; I don't care." After a moment she resumed. "So I must tell the truth? Evidently. Most of it, in any case. Thank you for the tip. You had a question to ask. What is it?"

"It is more or less answered," I replied. "I will not trouble you with it." Like a sudden wave the full possibilities of the catastrophe broke over me. "How you *could!*" I broke out. "Do you realise what this will mean to Michael? We shall all be branded, but he—well, it may kill him. His bitterest enemy could not wish him a more cruel misfortune!"

"Curse me, Dick; call me every evil name. There will be many to support you before long. Perhaps I am a little disappointed; perhaps I expect from you something nearer understanding. As for Michael, it is hard on him. I admit that. But times are hard, and—well, I am not in love with Michael, you see. Do you understand now? —just a little?"

She faced me quickly and her cheeks were ivory pale. She was suddenly older, and there was a strange pity in my heart for her loneliness and for the gentle passion of her last words.

"Perhaps—a little," I said softly, and hurried away.

3.

Barbara heard me through in silence. Then:

"Who is this Moffat?"

I told her what I knew, and added:

"He has justification, you see. She treated him badly when she was up, and——"

"Now he kicks her when she's down! Very pretty."

"Hardly, Barbara. Be reasonable. She was not down until he contrived it."

"Zut! They'd have traced her without his sneaking little help! Spare me your casuistry, Dick. The man's a swine, and you know it!"

I shrugged my shoulders. Continued argument was useless.

"Have it your own way. Our job is to decide what to do next. There is Michael. . . ."

"There is also Monica," replied Barbara tartly. "She must leave town at once. I'll take her to Whern. It's shut up and she can stay there in a wilderness of dust-sheets with old Mrs. Marlowe. No one will be an atom the wiser. Thank Heaven I resisted the snobbery of this hospital business! The house can be useful instead of merely a monument to our patriotism."

She spoke so bitterly that I looked at her in surprise.

"You take treachery calmly, Barbara."

Perhaps there was a tinge of the sneer in my voice. She turned on me with passion.

"Damn your clichés! *Treachery!* She has stood up for herself and her man, and I admire her for it."

"Even if, incidentally, she kills *your* man?"

With a little catch of the breath she stared at me in savage silence. I felt obscurely that she might hit me in the face, but the next moment she bowed her head and walked slowly away.

"I might retort cruelly, Dick," she said slowly, "but we must not quarrel again at this point. They need help—both of them. I am sorry I was rude. Do you agree that she should go to Whern?"

"I agree that she must leave town, but whether Whern is the best . . . Michael would be bound to know. . . ."

"True. Well, I will take her there at once, and she can leave in a day or two if necessary. By the way, you did not tell me how the letter came into the post?"

"I can only guess at present. The Swiss 'bag' is the most likely explanation. She is intimate with one of the attachés at the Legation. A careless mistake—the letters wrongly sorted—it might easily happen."

Barbara nodded sadly.

"Poor, poor child!" she whispered. "And poor all of us! . . ."

"Let us at least be thankful we are spared publicity," I said. "There are compensations in social influence—if you have it."

"You are *certain* nothing can get out?"

I could not meet the searching query in her eyes.

"No," I admitted reluctantly. "I am not *certain*. But with any luck . . ."

4.

Unfortunately even luck failed us. Reviewing past events from this vantage-point of my obscure but at least stable present, I see that chance had set steadily against us from the date of the Rodbury strike. Possibly the highest point of our eleventh-hour recovery predated even that episode; certainly from then onward our history as a dynasty is the history of an ebbing tide, each wavelet seeking frantically to overstep its predecessor, now and again with success, but in the main with a failure that became momentarily more evident.

Glancing through the last night's debate in *The Times* on the morning following my conversations

just recorded, my eye fell on a startling caption: "COUNTESS KOLOSZVARY." With a sudden sinking of the heart I read the brief paragraph. One of the "patriotic Socialist" members had asked the Home Secretary whether, in view of the strict measures in force against alien enemies in Great Britain, he was aware that the wife of a Hungarian nobleman was living in London, using her maiden name, and allowed to go about unhindered, and whether, if the Countess Koloszvary were favoured with this liberty, similar indulgence might not be extended to humbler folk in a like position who had not the advantage of her aristocratic connections. The Home Secretary in reply reminded the hon. member that the lady was an Englishwoman, and that the authorities were fully alive to her position with regard to her husband's nationality. The hon. member demanded why, in that case, she should feel it advisable to use her maiden name. "I expect," said the Home Secretary with his usual amiability, "that she finds the spelling easier for shopping purposes." (Laughter.)

The incident was trivial enough. A mere coincidence, perhaps. But I was disturbed, and during the day was haunted by the possible appearance of further Parliamentary trouble.

It was not long in coming. The very next morning when, drawn by a strange and terrifying curiosity, I turned to the report of the Commons debate, I fell immediately on a question to the Home Secretary (addressed this time by an obscure

member of the small Radical Pacifist group) to some such effect as the following: "Was it a fact that the Countess Koloszvary was a sister of Viscount Whern, and if so, did the Government feel it in accordance with their warlike principles that a responsible War Office official should be connected by marriage with an enemy alien?" The Home Secretary replied to the first part of the question in the affirmative; the latter point, however, he was sorry to confess, escaped him entirely. "The purpose of the question was to discover whether the views of the Government were so far modified as to entitle them to the support of members hitherto opposed to their policy," explained the enquirer. "I hope not," replied the Rt. Hon. gentleman. (Laughter.)

But that was not all. Half a column further down a bellicose Slavophil asked for a positive assurance that the Government were not intriguing for a separate peace with Austria-Hungary. Not only was there a suggestion of some such intrigue in this happening and in that, but the recently admitted fact that an officer in the confidence of the Army Council was brother-in-law to a Magyar aristocrat seemed to make it possible for Ministers to be in personal and unofficial touch with an enemy as bitter and as shamelessly militarist as the Prussians themselves.

I did not trouble to read the answer. There was no further doubt in my mind that these questions were inspired. The third one was particularly unconvincing. The member was a practised Par-

liamentarian, and his reference to the Army Council was too naïve to be anything but a sham.

It was one of the worst mornings I ever spent. Not only was I now positive that Moffat and his friends had taken this means of evading a breach of the Secrets Act and were engineering a Parliamentary agitation against Monica, but I suspected that by now Michael would, in all likelihood, have been officially advised of the fatal letter. Every ring on the telephone meant panic. By three o'clock I was incapable of further nervous reaction and it was with helpless calm that I saw the door open and Michael walk into the room. He came straight to the table and sat on the corner with an odd jauntiness.

"I'm finished, Dick," he said. "I suppose you know all about this letter business?"

His smile had the wry falsity of despair. I was frightened for his mental balance. And why should he assume that I knew what had been until now hidden from himself? Did he suspect complicity? With the shameful foolishness of a small boy detected in a blundering duplicity I mumbled an affirmative.

He continued to swing his leg, and his lips seemed to congeal into a grin of rage. I roused myself to break the spell.

"I know," I said, "because Merrick told me confidentially before he sent the matter further. I have been thinking and hoping . . . It was useless to tell you. Besides, I was hardly free to speak. But as for being 'finished' . . ."

"It's true, of course?" he queried sharply.

I nodded.

"I saw the letter."

"And Monica?"

"And Monica."

There was silence. Suddenly he sprang off the table and began walking quickly up and down the room. I felt the tension relax; was the Michael that I knew coming to life again? Not yet. He began to mutter half to himself, half aloud:

"I hope she's satisfied! I hope she's satisfied now! The family is done for—shamed—utterly finished. And to think of the end coming through treachery!"

He swung round on me and cried out in anguish:

"What have I done, Dick, to deserve this? I tried and tried. . . . And the spying was done at my very table——"

This time the fit had spent itself. The next minute he had recovered his usual melancholy austerity, and, with it, the hesitations of his sensitive and complex nature.

"I have to consider what to do—personally, I mean. So far they oppose my going to France; to me that seemed the way out. Would it be running away, Dick? I find it hard to know; and I am tired. I cannot make up my mind as I used to. Perhaps I should ignore the whole affair? . . . She must pay for her crime, but why should I suffer? And Barbara? And all of us?"

"Let us talk it over this evening," I said. "I

will think about it, and you will know more definitely what is the War Office view."

He seemed relieved at the respite.

"All right. I will go back and see the General now. Expect me for dinner."

Left alone I rang up Barbara, but Levitt told me she had gone to Whern in the car "with Miss Monica." I hung up, wondering whether the journey had been made at the best or at the worst possible moment.

CHAPTER XII

1.

"SHE held her head high and smiled that brilliant smile. . . ." Is it all genuine admiration that I now feel or is self so tremendous that I salute in her gambler's throw my chance of heaven? There was little enough promise of heaven at the time. Weeks of bitter recrimination, of slander and foulness—and the last tragedy. From the catastrophe I profited and the rest went under. But, indeed, I am not so selfish. Monica showed herself unflinching and a woman. Is that no cause for admiration? For the rest—I would wish it otherwise if I could. We are the involuntary heirs of yesterday.

* * * * *

At dinner no sign of Barbara. Michael seemed peevishly interrogatory, but his questioning was of glance, not of word. He spoke little at table, and even in the library afterwards I was compelled myself to raise the subject that was foreground and background of our thoughts.

"You saw the General?"

"Merely to resign."

I stared.

"Resign what?"

"Everything."

"But, Michael—surely until we know what is to happen——?"

He sat staring at the empty grate, and an unlighted cigar twitched nervously between his teeth. Suddenly:

"Why is Barbara away? Where is she?"

"She has taken Monica to Whern."

There was no escape. Blunt candour was the only policy.

"To Whern?" An evil smile flickered in his eyes. "That is charming. It only needed that to prove my complicity. I am blessed with loyal women, Richard."

I flared out at the cruel injustice.

"It is abominable to say such things! Barbara has done this out of pity. You wouldn't have Monica alone in London . . . ?"

"Your warmth does you credit," he sneered. "To anyone less well acquainted with the natural bias . . ."

For a moment I hung over him trembling with rage. He looked me coolly in the face and the contempt in his gaze shrivelled my indignation, for it had no roots in honour, and withered as it had sprung up, in an instant of time. I was at the door when he called me back.

"We can quarrel later, brother," he said levelly. "I am going to telephone to Whern. Come and sit down."

During the minutes of waiting for the trunk call to be connected, we sat in resentful silence. I was afraid now; not afraid of Michael, but for

him and for all of us. He was savage with self-pity, and I felt unable to gauge the extremities to which a desperate man of his temperament might be driven by anger and by shame.

A car turned the corner of the square, darkened for a moment the dusk of the uncurtained window, and stopped just out of sight. Simultaneously the telephone rang. Michael took up the receiver and was confirming his number to the operator when my quick ear heard the rattle of a latchkey in the lock. In a moment I was out of the room and hastening across the hall to meet Barbara.

"Be very careful!" I urged in a low voice. "He's not himself, and provocation might be dangerous."

She looked at me in sombre silence, nodded, and turned to go upstairs. I reached the study in time to hear the end of Michael's conversation.

". . . has left? When?"

. . . .

"Then is—— Here, Dick!" (to me). "Why did you go out?"

"Barbara," I said simply.

He turned once more to the telephone.

"Hullo! Hullo! Are you there? . . . Damn, they've gone. . . . Is she coming down?"

"I imagine so," I replied, and stood in uncomfortable suspense, gazing without eyes at the rows of bookshelves that lined the wall. Michael had not moved from his chair. I had my back to the room, but could feel the tenseness of his attitude. How read the portents? Was he crouched to

spring, or collecting endurance to bear further blows? There had been a note of appeal even in his fiercest anger of a minute back; it was as though he shrank from brutality, turned in despairing rage, and shrank again. I knew that his reflective delicacy of mind might well betray him at the crisis of his fury. At the same time, he was of the finest tempering; there was no inch of weakness in the resilient length of him. He would not give way; equally, I felt sure, he would not, could not dominate, by mere violence of emotion.

And still Barbara tarried. I heard Michael move impatiently. With an effort I turned and walked toward where he sat.

"She is changing, I expect," I said vaguely.

He looked at me with an odd wildness.

"Changing? Why again? Is she not changed enough?"

My position was rather pitiable. Rightly he did not trust me, and yet I was hoping to bring him once more to normal acceptance of a tragic fact. There seemed nothing to say. In one secret moment I cursed the fate that ever brought Barbara across our path. But the next I was in the grip of a greater shame, for a man may deny his parents and live, but he that denies his woman is no man at all.

Without a preliminary sound the door opened and Barbara came in. She wore black, and her hair was braided low over her ears. Going straight to Michael she knelt beside him and bowed her head over his hand.

"Forgive me, Michael dear. It was not done without much thought. She could not stay where she was—alone—with the storm brewing. I had to act at once. She shall leave Whern if you wish it; and I am here to be punished as and when you desire."

He stared at her proud head bent low by his side. The lines about his mouth relaxed a little. It was a princely opportunity for graciousness, and his every tendency urged him to embrace it. If transmission of will exists I did my humble share in bringing him to a decision. After a brief struggle, his sense of gesture conquered. He laid his other hand on her glittering hair.

"Get up, please, child. Let us talk quietly."

She rose and, without a glance at me, seated herself on a plain upright chair a little in front of her husband. Michael paused an instant and then, to my intense relief, got up and moved to the mantelpiece. When I saw him once more with hunched shoulders, his hands in his trouser pockets, his feet on the curb, I began to believe the situation was indeed saved. He began to speak, but quietly and with his usual wistful diffidence.

"Whern is not easy. . . . You see that, Barbara? It is not easy. For every reason somewhere else would be better. . . . But I do not know what will happen. She may have to leave the country . . . even if nothing gets out. If it does . . . What is her feeling? Perhaps I should go and see her. . . ."

Barbara and I exchanged a quick look. There was danger in this.

"Would it not be best to see first the course of events?"

"Maybe," replied Michael, "if that were possible. But I have burnt my boats. I have no entrée now."

"I have," I said.

He looked at me doubtfully.

"We cannot push ourselves into things just yet. It would make matters worse. On the other hand, we *can* decide our own policy and that depends on . . ."—he could not bring himself to mention Monica by name—"on . . . how we all feel about it. I think I must go to Whern."

Barbara interposed.

"May I suggest? Let me get her to Jim's place in Wales. Then come and see her there. As you say, Whern is difficult. No one knows she is there except Mrs. Marlowe. The house is shut up. But if you go down . . ."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I agree. But it must not be left long. When can you arrange the move to Wales?"

"Three days," said Barbara.

"All right. Expect me Monday."

We had won what in seeming was a victory. Next morning Michael remained hidden in his study. Occasionally I heard the telephone clink faintly in the basement. At lunch he swallowed some fish and a glass of wine.

"I shall be out all the afternoon," he said.

As he crossed the square his narrow shoulders were bowed and tired. The very strangeness of

his mufti gave poignancy to his look of age and shame.

"Now for Monica," said Barbara. "She must leave Whern to-morrow early. Plas Rhidden is warned."

"I will go," I said. "You are needed here to keep Michael sane. He looked so old just now."

Going to his room to fetch a pipe left there the night before, I found the hearthrug strewn with newspaper. Sheet after sheet were there, lying at random, crumpled hastily. Michael must have ordered in every journal published. In the same instant that I realised the cause came curiosity as to the result. Feverishly I scanned the pages. Nothing. And then, when rising from my knees to leave the room, my eye caught in a distant corner a tumbled whiteness. With a strange sinking I retrieved the paper from the spot to which, evidently, it had been thrown. Hardly breathing, I read and read. Was this also Moffat? I was not far from tears when I thought of Michael, in lonely humiliation, reading this ranting beastliness, and then coming to lunch without a tremor, without a word. His shoulders, as he crossed the square, had been with reason bowed. I felt a sudden ache of terror. Shoulders bend, but hearts break. Then the heedless cruelty of the article forced itself on me again and drove fear for Michael from my mind. In its place flamed a wild anger against an epoch that made possible the victory of such ill-bred cant over the spirit of gentility. The insolence, the hypocrisy, the

muddy, hateful prejudice that thus easily found public hearing!

The article was super-patriotism. After a vile garnishing of Monica's indiscretion, it proceeded to a sketch of Michael and his official responsibilities.

"His lordship is a man of discrimination," it concluded. "He is young and, to the best of our knowledge, in good health. The majority of his generation, those to whom chance has not given so freely of social prominence, of riches, and of cosmopolitan connections, have elected to meet the enemy face to face. For what are doubtless excellent reasons, Lord Whern prefers the security of Whitehall and the more subtle personal contact with the Central Powers that relationship and feminine intuition alone can achieve."

Scrupulously I burnt that leprous thing until nothing but charred ash remained. There was an uncanny sense of the victim's character behind such shameless provocation, for Michael was of the kind that hide their wounds and bleed to death in secret, rather than admit a scratch.

I was to drive myself to Whern Royal, sleep at the inn, and, the next morning, take Monica from the Abbey into Wales. Something must be said to Barbara of the libel I had just destroyed. Then I would start.

She was in her boudoir writing letters.

"I think I shall go," I said. "Something bad has happened. Michael has been dragging the gutter Press for garbage and found a filthy screed

that calls him a coward and a traitor. It was in his room and I burnt it. You will need all your pluck to-night, when he returns. Keep him with you—by any means."

She stared at me in sombre silence. Then:

"He thought me beautiful once," she said.

I groped towards her line of reasoning. Gradually my mind closed round the ultimate implication. A jealousy, as presumptuous as it was unwelcome, throbbed through the grave pity of the moment. I choked it to false quiescence.

"By any means," I repeated dully. "Only keep him—and hold him."

She smiled through misty eyes.

"Good-bye, Dick," she said softly. "I have telephoned Monica that you are coming."

And her head bent once more over her bureau.

2.

The wind had changed and the dusk was loud with a rising gale, as I ran the car into the inn yard of Whern Royal. Clouds raced up from the west; the huge elms in the churchyard sang and creaked against a lowering sky. I went early to bed and lay for a while, savouring the homely remoteness of the low room under the eaves, with its sloping floor and sweet odour of country cleanliness. Far away in London Michael was facing the ruins of his life. And Barbara? I dropped into sleep, and dream came to the pursuance of my thoughts. I was in her room at Whern, but this time invisibly—a spectator, not a protagonist.

Michael was standing, as I had stood, against the towering chimney breast, his head drooped, and his sad eyes were fixed on a smouldering fire. So vivid was the scene that I heard once again the ticking of the clock that had, on that evening of our madness, marked the passing of the minutes. Barbara was nowhere to be seen. Then silently the curtains parted that divided her bed-chamber from the boudoir-sitting-room in which Michael waited alone. She crossed the floor silently. Her feet were bare; her hair, like a rich mantilla, flowed over her shoulders. He raised his head and stared. With a slow, wide gesture she spread out her arms; the loose wrapper fell open, and she stood before him—and me——

"What is it? Who's there?"

The knocking brought me to fuddled wakefulness. Sleep and its visions clung round my eyes. My mind reeled towards sanity. There was the click of a lifted latch; a shaft of light struck across the ceiling, widened to a tremulous fan. The door opened wide, and there before me, carrying an unsteady candle, was Monica.

Fully awake, I sat up in bed and stared at her. She closed the door, set down the candle and came quickly to the bedside.

"Come at once! Quickly! I am frightened. It's not a nice feeling. Get up and dress!"

The note of irony did more even than her pallor and the fantastic suddenness of her appearance to steady my faculties.

"Wait downstairs. I'll be ready in two minutes."

As I forced on my clothes, I became aware for the first time that rain was falling. The wind wailed in the chimney, and the storm lashed the window-panes and pattered briskly through an open lattice on to the oilcloth. Curiosity struggled with fear. What had happened? And the next moment—— Was it possible?

Together we passed out into the darkness. Monica carried an electric torch. Through the driving rain we hurried towards the gate of the park. On either hand was turbulent blackness; before us shone the circle of white light, and through it the raindrops glistened and danced as they splashed on the stones and gravel of the roadway. Without waiting for questions Monica began to speak, and her words, muffled by the noise of the wind, came to me as fragments of some legendary tale.

"... Barbara telephoned that you were coming ... to shake off the oppression of the house, ... struck across the park, up through the woods, and along Wherntop It was fine then, and the country was—oh, was English. I never realised before how native I am—really. Having time to think—I suppose that's what does it. ... ... round by Gallows Bottom, and so in by the gate above Nicholas. It was seven when I reached the house. In the hall was Michael——"

It was not really unexpected, but some automatic sense of what is startling prompted an exclamation.

"Yes," Monica went on. "He sat there on one

of those ghastly throne things that no one ever sat in before and looked so old, so old. . . . He just fixed his eyes on me and said nothing. Like an excited fool I challenged him—jauntily, I dare-say; I am a bad penitent. Or was. I feel all out for sackcloth now. He answered me with a horrid quietness. 'I have come home, sister.' That was all. For a moment I had no ideas. What a rotten feeling it is—that sense of paralysis of mind! I did not know what to say or do. But habit got me going again, and I told him I was leaving next day and hoped he would forgive the brief trespass. More jauntiness. He echoed my words indifferently: 'Going? To-morrow? It does not matter. Nothing matters to Whern.' I felt suddenly nervous. 'Why have you come?' I asked. But he only repeated: 'I have come home, sister. Surely there is nothing very odd in coming home?' Then he got up and walked past me to the open door. 'I shall stroll out and see the woods again. They are very lovely in fine weather. And trees know nothing, can imagine nothing.' I watched him cross the terrace and disappear behind the copse below the sunk fence. Then I went in and sat down to my boiled egg. Marlowe said nothing of Michael. Evidently she had not seen him. After supper I went to my room——"

"Which are you using?" I asked.

"The one Mary had long ago—right at the top of the central block."

"And Mrs. Marlowe?"

"Oh, she sleeps at her cottage."

"Monica! Do you mean to say you are all alone in the Abbey?"

"I am. It's pretty ghastly, but then I'm done for, and isolation seems appropriate. I have always had a sense of staging."

We were now in the woods, and the rain fell less heavily. The trunks gleamed against the black undergrowth as the fringe of the torch's light touched them and passed them by. I shivered, less from cold than at the thought of the gaunt and empty house to which we were bound. Monica proceeded:

"By that time the clouds were driving up, and when I tried sitting at the window I found it cold. I wondered whether Michael had come in—or would come in. I wondered what I ought to do. Frankly, I was scared of him, and—well, the culprit cannot suddenly come the maternal over the judge. I tried to imagine I heard your car; it was a comfort to think of you at the inn. But the wind was getting louder. At nine-thirty I went to bed. For the first time the noises of the house worried me. I thought of those miles of corridor, of the stairs and stairs, of the lumps of furniture under their coverings. Of course, all the time I was listening—listening for Michael. The rain began. He will get wet, I thought. Only that. Just that he would get wet. It never occurred to me that he might be with you at Royal or in some other inn or anywhere but out in the drenching woods. . . . And then, about eleven,

I heard something. A door closing. I was sure of it. Somewhere far down in the house a door had closed. I was by now properly nervy. Nothing could have got me out of that room. I crouched down in bed and tried to shut my ears with the clothes. But in a little while I pulled myself together and began to listen again. This time the noises of wind and rattling doors and of the rain on the sill were delicious familiarities. No alien sound at all. I settled for sleep. And then——"

She stopped. In the moment of silence we cleared the edge of the trees and were on the grass flat of the arena. The sky was thinning out and faint light patches among the clouds told of a moon shining above the level of wind and storm.

" —and then it happened. I just bolted, Dick. Into my clothes and down those horrible stairs and over the park and through the woods, hardly seeing or feeling till I got to Royal and the inn and you. All to pieces I was."

" But what—— ?" I began.

She laughed nervously.

" That's the idiocy. I'm not even sure. But I *believe* I heard—at the time I could have sworn it—I believe I heard—a shot. . . ."

We were passing the ruin. Its irregular bulk loomed over us. I touched the rough masonry with my hand and imagined that my nerves rallied a little by virtue of the rugged endurance of this ancient keep. Monica had heard a shot. Had she in truth ? Of course she had. I had

known it all along; had known it from the moment of her rousing me from sleep. And then to the extreme of scepticism. Imagination, pure and simple. She was avowedly wrought up; any sudden noise would suggest tragedy. We skirted the ponds, mounted the opposing slope, crossed the sunk fence, the lawn, the lower terrace. Then I stopped.

"Monica," I said, "we must do this alone. Can you stick it?"

She tossed her head.

"I'm all right now, Richard, thank you, and I am up against plenty of bigger things than—than an empty house."

"Sorry," I replied.

We crossed the flags and turned the corner of the south front. Another minute and we were under the vaulting of the porch.

Out of consideration for my own unsteady nerves, as much as from ardour of action, I passed straight to the front door and was groping for the light switch, when Monica caught me by the arm.

"No use," she said. "The light's off."

"Off?" I felt stupidly indignant at what seemed deliberate incompetence.

"After all, if there's no one to work the engine, there can't be any light, can there?"

Her mocking tone revived my common sense. Of course; the house had been shut up for months. The eeriness of the place began to creep over me. I had so counted on light.

"Give me the torch," I said.

We paused in the great hall. The columns rose

into immeasurable gloom. The beam of light was a futile whisker twitched about an inky void. When we started to walk towards the broad flight of steps that rose from the hall to the octagon beneath the great tower, our footsteps echoed harshly against the naked walls. The curtains were down from the octagon; the sofas and chairs piled under dust-sheets. The alcove in which Barbara and I had sat that momentous evening yawned emptily to the right.

"Where are you going?" whispered Monica.

"To the north tower," I answered.

Up the main staircase, round the gallery landing with its little balconies overhanging the gulf below, along the corridor from which opened Barbara's rooms, we passed in tense procession. At the end was a swing door. It gave on to the spiral staircase of the northern tower and, beyond, on to a small landing with three doors. This was Michael's domain. It consisted of his bedroom, his bathroom and a turret room, in which he kept boots and fishing tackle, some odd books and papers, his private safe, and such miscellaneous objects as could find no proper place even in an existence so carefully ordered as was his. Outside this door I stood and listened. The wind sighed up and down the spiral stair; Monica moved slightly, and the rustle of her wet mackintosh set faint echoes whispering above our heads. I took a final hold on my quivering nerves and turned the handle of the door. It yielded. The torch threw a greedy light about the tiny room. Michael was not there.

3.

Dawn found us huddled in weary wakefulness on the window-seat of Monica's bedroom. The storm had passed, and a desultory wind ruffled the ivy that clustered about the mullions and over the outer sill. Daylight was bringing a pale vigour to a sky of flaccid and struggling clouds.

"Barbara should arrive soon," I said.

Monica yawned.

"Suppose so. Do I look very ghastly? A giddy night on the body-snatching lay takes the curl out of the *ewige Weibliche*. As for you! . . ."

I was too tired to resent her flippancy; too tired even not to resent it. The snapping of our mutual suspense over the bareness of that empty turret room had done more than shatter the nervous self-possession that supported temporary reserve. It had set free the illimitable fatigue and irritation of months of anxiety. With Monica the reaction had been to hysterical levity. With me to resentment. Fiercely I had disbelieved her whole account of the day's happening; for a few minutes I had disbelieved even that Michael had been seen at Whern. In the long corridor opposite Barbara's door I had accused her of deliberate fabrication.

"Is the whole thing your conception of a joke?" I had asked bitterly.

For reply she had pirouetted on her toes and jazzed a few provocative steps. In the instant of silence between her challenge and an angry acceptance of it the telephone had sounded. We were

caught up in that breathless moment by the shrill whir of its distant call.

"Michael!" cried Monica, and flew to the stairs.

I had followed her, incredulous in my fury of the very sound I had so clearly heard. When I reached the library (as the room in which Monica had been taking her simple meals, it was to some degree habitable) she was already at the receiver, and I had known at once that it was not Michael at the other end and who it was.

"... Yes. ... Yes. ... No, I went to fetch him. ... Not since about seven. ... Yes. ... Nothing. ... Just sitting in the hall. ... I don't know. ... Oh, I can't explain on this machine. Can you come? ... All right. Do you want to speak to Dick? ... Good-bye."

"She'll be here in about three hours," Monica had said. "What in the meantime?"

* * * * *

A listlessness had come over me. But terror had gone from the dark, deserted house and it needed only a conquest of apathy to insist on a continuance of the search. Mechanically and methodically we had investigated every corner of the building. About four o'clock exhaustion came into its kingdom, and under its leaden but sleepless tyranny we sat out the time until the coming of daylight and Barbara.

* * * * *

Between Monica's aggressive frivolity and the screech of Barbara's wheels on the drive I recall

neither movement nor idea that broke the torpor of our waiting. The sky cleared, the sun rose and a cruel beauty spread slowly over the indifferent woods. At the first distant sound of the engine I struggled stiffly to my feet.

"Here she comes!"

She must have made a record course from the park gate. I could hear the car leave the high-road, there was a brief period of gluttonous throbbing and it seemed the next moment that the sound shot clear of the trees and was scoring an angry mark across the stillness of the arena.

We met her in the great hall. She wore the leather coat and tight fur cap which were among my earliest memories.

"I want some coffee," she said. "While it is heating, tell me what has happened."

She heard us out in silence. Then:

"There is little story at my end. He went out after lunch—as you know, Dick—and never came back. I did not begin to worry until dinner-time, but half-past eight and no sign of him . . . It was awkward. Enquiries at the War Office . . . after what has happened . . . I couldn't telephone, could I? I asked several likely friends, but none had seen him. Then suddenly I thought of Whern. I rang you about ten; again at eleven-thirty; again about one. No answer. It was a last despairing try that fetched you down."

"Even if I had heard," said Monica, "I should not have dared . . ."

Barbara waved an impatient hand.

"Of course not. Anyway, it is unimportant. We must find him. Dick shall fetch his car and we'll divide the country."

"The woods first!" came suddenly from Monica. "I was frightened of the woods last night."

In the presence of her sister-in-law Monica had become wistful and pleading. Barbara was in command, and for my part there seemed no lovelier cure for a tired spirit than to watch her and to obey.

"Perhaps the woods now? . . ." I suggested.

Monica passed her hand across her eyes.

"Come on," she said, and stood up. The next moment she swerved and stumbled heavily. We caught her as she fell and placed her in a deep chair. For a moment she lay there with closed lids, then with a convulsive movement flung her head forward on to her knees and burst into a terrible sobbing. Barbara knelt by her side and took her in compassionate arms.

"Poor child!" she murmured; "poor, reckless child!"

I turned away and stood at the window watching the bland sunshine on the meaningless beauty of Whern. As I watched, a man broke from the trees on the far rim of the arena and began running towards the house. Some instinct prompted me to go and meet him. Slipping on to the terrace I hurried to the sunk fence. Beneath it and out of sight of the library windows, I awaited the coming of the messenger. That he was a messenger and pertinent to the subject of the moment I had

no doubt; when, as he approached and I recognised one of the few keepers passed over by the war, I could almost have taken the tidings out of his mouth. . . .

So Otranto had staged another tragedy. That these trumpery battlements should have crowned the death scenes of two successive lords of Whern was revolting in its absurdity. Harold had fallen at the foot of its ludicrous twenty feet of crag; Michael, in its gimcrack guardroom, had scattered his brains and, with them, the garnered dignity, the fine, wry maturity of an ancient family.

"They have found him," I said.

The two women were standing when I came once more to the library window, Monica red-eyed and drooping, Barbara clothed in the sullen majesty that seemed to fall about her at moments of intensity.

"Found him?" she echoed dully. Then with a short cry of anguish she ran towards me.

"He is dead, Richard! Where is he? Take me to him——"

"They are bringing him here."

Monica burst into tears again, and the sound of her weeping restored the self-control that for a moment her sister-in-law appeared to have lost.

"Dick," she said quietly, "Monica is going at once. To Wales. And then to Ireland. She *must* go. It is a last chance. For a little while minds will be full of—this other thing. She must get to Ireland."

"Go at once?" I questioned. "By car?"

"Of course. Driving herself. Will you fetch

the two-seater from Royal? Go now. I will attend to the . . ."

Her voice trailed off at the edge of an ugly word. Monica, once more composed, gestured me to go. As I left the house it occurred to me that I was master now, master of Whern Abbey, and sole heir to its strange, calamitous memories.

CHAPTER XIII

1.

It is not that I failed, during the weeks of torture and publicity that followed Michael's suicide, to realise that there was no longer disloyalty in my love for Barbara. Indeed, the wonder of that tragic hazard glowed beyond the horizon of my every waking thought. But they were grim days, when lawyers and newspapers and all the tedium of probate and inheritance cluttered the foreground of existence; when gravity was needed and calculating common sense; when the world, hungry for sensation, whimpered on the very brink of the dead man's grave.

I hope that we played our part with seemliness. Barbara in her weeds ruled for a brief space the heady kingdom of popular sympathy. Deliberately I avoided her company, understanding well that a collateral successor with a withered foot was of interest only in his relation to the beautiful widow, a perspective in which, under the keen eye of a nation of scandalmongers, I had no wish to place either myself or her. Anthony, back from France, attended the funeral, hung about town for a few days, and returned to the front. He asked no questions, feeling, no doubt—as did so many of the young men caught in the turbulent coils of

war—that future developments were at best trivial things beside a scabrous present, at worst the concern of others than himself. Mary did something to atone for her earlier discourtesies. With an assiduity, as pathetic as it was clumsy, she put herself at Barbara's service. Michael's death was to her symbolic of social catastrophe. She remembered him as more than a brother; as, rather, a fine antagonist; and for all her bitterness towards his creed, there was enough of inherited sympathy in her blood to bring her at once and abjectly to do his memory honour. If ever there comes upon England the terror of which she and her companions used glibly to speak, I am more sure that Mary will be sacrificed than of the god at whose altar she will die.

At last there came a day when it appeared that the worst was over, when there seemed once more a prospect that our lives might become our own again, when between our misfortunes and the pitiless curiosity of a million strangers a film of forgetfulness began to form. On the evening of that day I found myself alone with Barbara. She had taken a tiny house on Campden Hill and there I sought her out, because there were many things to be said and some that could wait no longer. As I walked through the gardens I felt again the old excitement. For the first time since the tragedy I was an individual and not a personage in a case; for the first time I could think of her as a woman and not as my brother's widow. I daresay that my enthusiasm bred over-con-

fidence, and that I brought into her fragile and miniature drawing-room an assertiveness that checked whatever tendency there may have been on her part to a revival of the delirium that once held us both in such sweet fever. Certainly there was unmistakable warning in the level gentleness of her greeting.

"I am glad to see you, Dick. There is a heap to say. It is hard to believe we have met almost daily during this time. Such crowds . . . And everyone else's business . . ."

I settled myself on the sofa.

"There is certainly something very important that *I* want to say," I began, but was checked by the comical dismay that threw her face mockingly askew.

"Dick!" she gasped. "You are not really——"

I laughed, as much with pleasure at my own rapid sense of her meaning as with appreciation of its humour.

"No. Not just now. Something easier, but rather large. It's about Whern."

"Whern? The house, you mean?"

"The house and—all of it. Do you want it?"

"Dick, you're not going to sell it?"

"Not if you want it."

She stared at me broodingly. Her great, sad eyes were never more beautiful. Slowly she drooped her lids and I saw a rising colour spread over her cheeks.

"You said you were going to talk of something else," she whispered.

"Barbara darling!" I leant forward to take her hand. "Truly, truly I didn't mean that. I know this Whern business is connected—my whole life is connected—with—the other thing. But there is a practical side. After all, we must live. Not only us, but Anthony and Mary—and Monica. If you want Whern, it is yours; and, when you are sweet enough to ask me, I will come as a visitor. But if not—well, I prefer the cash."

"Who will buy?" she asked in a low voice.

"Answer my question. Do you want it?"

She raised her eyes and I saw that they were full of tears. Slowly she shook her head.

"I couldn't, Dick. How I long to want it! But I couldn't live there. Not now. Not with all of you coming and going, and yet nothing as it used to be—except the ghosts. I have no right there. I came and—failed. Oh, Dick, how pitifully I have failed!"

"Barbara! Please!"

Passively she let her proud head rest in the hollow of my shoulder. In a few moments she was calm again. Wiping her eyes, she squeezed my hand and sat upright.

"Thank you, Dick. I'm sorry. This sale of Whern. Is it essential? Surely you could let it?"

"I daresay. And sale is not, in the sense you mean, essential. The investment after the Rodbury sale is doing nicely. But the income is about half what it was. To keep up Whern, even as non-resident landlord (for I couldn't get a rent to matter these days), would mean selling most of

the outlying property. Lopping it off. Whern would be a monstrosity with no hinterland. So both common sense and instinct is to cut loose. We are not a cheap family, you know. And Monica has just written me that she needs money, even in Ireland. Obviously she does. Therefore I must raise some. How better than by selling something no one of us can bear or afford to keep ? The entail has expired. Also my sense of dramatic melancholy is a strong one. Whern as an expression of Braden is over. Braden itself is over——"

She moved impatiently.

"Don't ! It isn't true ! It shan't be true. Good heavens, Dick, what a wretched thing is a woman that cannot even give a child !"

It was a dangerous moment, but I fought down the insurgent longing.

"Sweetheart," I said gently, "let me be sane—at present. I mean that Braden as a gesture of nobility is, for its own sake, better a fragment of the past. We cannot go on mouthing a dead creed. The family will persist and, perhaps, be finer stuff than ever, but splendid shells are for other snails than formerly. Surely I am right ? Better be forgotten than absurd."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Special pleading, I think. But I understand what you do not say. All the same it seems a terrible thing to do. And who will buy ?"

"That I cannot tell you," I said. "But he may exist. We have our profiteers, and Whern

presents incredible opportunities of embellishment."

"Where will *you* live?"

"The problem is not for to-day. In any case my home worries me less than my name. I can buy a flat, but I cannot sell a title."

"Sell it? Dick, you are horrible."

"It does not feel mine. I used to thank Heaven I was safe from it. Now it has dropped upon me, and I hate it. I shall try disuse. It may rust away. Under any reasonable law it would remain with you, and then——"

She put her hand over my mouth.

"You will either contradict yourself or break your promise in a moment! Better hush while there is time. Go and find a possible customer; then we will make a last decision. Though why," she added quickly, "I say 'we,' I don't know. It's not *my* house or *my* business!"

2.

When first I had conceived the idea of selling Whern, I had remembered, with an odd irrelevance, the Midland magnate who had once lent Michael his flat in Queen Anne's Gate. It was the good-fortune of this person to manufacture some commodity (the nature of which I forget) valuable to his countrymen in their struggle for existence. Whatever the commodity was, he made a great deal of it, and then a great deal more. Money became almost an embarrassment to him, until,

in the spring of 1917, it was suggested that the Government could make good use of some portion of the surplus and give a very decorative receipt. The proposal was a grateful one and the transaction speedily completed, so that the man to whom I now determined to offer Whern Abbey was no less a personage than William George Creevy, first Baron Cleckheaton.

My solicitor was amused. He almost hinted that I must have my little joke. I assured him that I was neither passing a quip nor seeking advice; I was giving an instruction. Whern was for sale, and its charms were to be displayed before the preposterous Creevy.

"But, Lord Whern!" the poor man expostulated, "it has been in your family for centuries! Allow an older man the liberty of protesting against so rash a decision. To let the house would be bad enough. To sell it! . . ."

"Possibly I may change my mind, if there are no takers," I replied. "In the meantime, thank you for hating the job, but it must be done. Please find some personal means of approach to this millionaire, and see that the possibility is suggested to him. I'll do the rest."

Late in September I could call on Barbara for the final conversation. Creevy showed inclinations. He was a good fellow in his way, and I got to like his square-toed consciousness of deserved success. It was not difficult for me to renew the acquaintance, on the strength of his former service to my brother. It was still easier, when he, on

the strength of a mysterious rumour, clumsily groped towards a confirmation from me that I might be persuaded to part with Whern, to feign surprise, then disinclination, then grudging neutrality. A few more meetings and I had promised to think the matter over thoroughly and let him know within a week.

"I want to get settled, you see," he said frankly, "and there are other possibilities. But I went down to Whern when first I heard of your—not wanting to live there, and I liked it—liked it immensely. So did Lady Cleckheaton."

"He is really a nice old thing," I said to Barbara. "And he never once sympathised with me, which was genuine tact."

"What a sentimental, kindly thing you are, Dick!" she laughed. "I doubt if anyone exists more ready to put a brave face on beastliness."

"Then I may proceed?" I asked.

She paused before answering. . . .

"Let us go down to-morrow—just we two. Then I'll answer. If it's too lovely, I may accept your gift after all and the 'nice old thing' can go and whistle for his Whern."

We started before eight o'clock. The carefully tended roads of the residential suburbs were still resonant with milk-carts and only dotted by the very earliest season-ticket holders hurrying to their trains. Autumn sunlight, in all its wistful serenity, lay caressingly on trees brilliant with reds and yellows. As I sat silent at the wheel, intense

consciousness of my companion faded somewhat into the waning splendour of the countryside. I pictured the Whern towards which we were hastening; the proud melancholy of the terraced woodland; the lovable absurdity of the Gothic Abbey, divine in its very incongruity as it sprawled there in the heart of September England. My ancestors seemed to rise from the road before me, swaying out from under the wheels of the car and, as they melted on this side or on that into golden hedgerow or between misty tree-trunks, casting looks of dumb reproach at the last frivolous Lord of Whern, who was ready in literal truth to sell his birthright for a mess of pottage. My resolution wavered. Why should I do this heartless, unimaginative thing? And my prophetic sentiments of a few weeks ago seemed pompous folly, such as a man might use to cloak weakness or greed or selfish treachery. There was discomfort in the idea that I was trifling with a betrayal of my family. What, after all, was the stature of common sense against that of tradition? Did I owe less to the centuries that gave me life and quality of mind than to the passing distresses of my own abnormal lifetime? I saw my proposed transaction with Creevy from another and evil angle. I dared to throw Whern as a sop to the Cerberus of social revolution. And to what end? Not to prevent revolution; not to guide it along wiser paths; merely to spare myself and my handful of relations a possible discomfort. In one wanton hour I would undo all and more than all that for which Michael had given his life.

Across my growing abstraction floated sullenly the wraith of Michael as I had last seen him, wrapped in a linen sheet on the huge oak table of the great hall at Whern, his dead limbs rigid in their shroud, his face a shattered cavity. I turned cold with horror. My hands must have gripped the wheel with a sudden, senseless violence, for Barbara gave a smothered cry and I woke with a start to reality. The car was swerving straight across the road towards the flimsy railing of an abandoned quarry. I got her round by an inch or two and, when the crisis was past, pulled up, for I found myself trembling and weak as after fever.

" I thought you were doing for both of us," said Barbara calmly. " Were you asleep ?"

" Not asleep exactly," I replied, " but dreaming bad dreams."

We started on our way once more, and I was careful to risk no repetition of disturbing fancies. I found it possible to consider the arguments for and against the sale of Whern in a proper spirit of detachment. The latter I summarised to Barbara.

" Is this devil's advocacy ?" she asked. " Or have you changed your mind ?"

" I have changed my mind (if ever it was in need of change, which I doubt), but I have not changed my heart."

She looked at me suspiciously.

" Don't explain," she said shortly.

I smiled and made no reply. The car purred on its way.

3.

Whern was as beautiful as I had ever seen it. There is poignant pleasure nowadays in the thought that my last glimpse of home was of mellow and gracious calm. We sat in the wan, cool sunshine on a fallen block of masonry between the ruin and the lake, eating our sandwiches and watching the sumptuous colours of the autumn woods rising behind the pale crenellations of the Abbey front. At last:

"How can you bear to lose it?" whispered Barbara.

For a moment longer I let the loveliness of Whern and the love I felt for it lull in their arms my now irrevocable resolution. Grotesquely I was reminded of the last few minutes in bed on a cold and busy morning. Then I thrust from me the caress and indolence of romance. On the way down I had yielded to its lure, had been ready to surrender the actual to the ideal, to have the effect for the sake of the cause. But no sooner had the strange trance been dispelled, than I saw that the nobility and loyalty which had called so urgently to my recently ascendant self were but specious rhetoric. More clearly than ever before I knew now not only what I meant to do but which way duty lay.

"You remember," I began, "the arguments against a sale of Whern with which I bored you this morning? You accused me of arguing against conviction. I wasn't doing that exactly. Indeed,

during the period of vagueness which nearly finished us both, I reached the point of admitting their ultimate validity. In short, I changed my mind. Then I came to and began to think on the other side. The results were feeble—cash and freedom from anxiety and a new kind of inverted snobbery—the snobbery of unobtrusiveness. Understand? So my mind stayed changed. My brain is more than opposed to any alienation from Whern; it insists on my living here, on my playing out the comedy of the landed aristocrat until the curtain is rung down forcibly by the hostility of a new order. Would you approve of that? Do you support my brain?"

"Against——?"

"Precisely. Against what? And it sounds so damned priggish to say 'heart.' Let me instead say 'against every desire and instinct that I possess.'"

Suddenly she turned and laid two hands on my shoulders. Looking me straight in the eyes:

"You mean me?" she said.

"I do," I replied and kissed her on her full, eager lips.

She did not move; merely drew back an inch or two and spoke into my very face.

"Dick, you are a darling and a gentleman. I am only a useless creature who has tried to help and failed. Now is another chance. Listen to me, and I will tell you what shall be done——"

Perhaps it was an impulse to secure freedom of judgment that prompted me. I took her hands,

pressed them to my lips and, rising, stood in front of her. She pouted a little.

" Mayn't I touch you ?"

" It isn't that. You know it isn't. Go on with your instructions."

" Not until you sit down." Then, pleadingly: " Please, Dick, be merciful. I won't hang round your neck."

I paid the expected tribute of a smile to her outward flippancy; to the deeper impulse that glowed in her wide eyes I gave obedience. She resumed:

" Once upon a time you asked me to run away with you. You were willing to face divorce and scandal. Now you are preparing to make a similar request for quite opposite reasons. A widow is as marriageable as any virgin. Only in my case there are difficulties. Therefore you mean to emigrate—to wherever those difficulties do not exist. Therefore you want to cut loose. Therefore you want to sell Whern."

I was embarrassed and amazed at her perception.

" Please go on," I said, a little breathlessly.

" All that this means," she continued (and the crispness of her voice became a level gentleness that spoke of rising emotion), " is that you regard me and Whern as alternatives. And you want me most. Well, dear Richard, it is not loving a man to be an alternative to his real existence. Here is Whern and here am I. Put me somewhere inconspicuous and keep us both——"

" Barbara !" Self-contempt overwhelmed me.

I was abased before her splendid generosity, as one evening long ago I had been abased before my brother. The next instant I felt nervous fury at the condescension of fate. Was I so wretched a thing that even human pride took pity on me?

"When you insult yourself——" I began angrily. But rage lasted no longer than self-scorn. I was aware suddenly of the immense surrender that her love made possible to her.

"Sweetheart, what is to be said? Thank you? Hardly. But you are great enough to understand what I am not great enough to say. But at least I am not so small as to endure another word." I took her arm and spoke close to her glowing cheek. "Never again shall you even *think* such a thing. As for Whern, the problem is solved. Come on. Let us go. We shall never come here any more."

I rose and walked quickly across the grass towards the car. As I cranked up, I saw that she had risen also and was approaching listlessly and with bowed head.

For a long time she did not speak. The car with its load of dead ideals crept Londonwards. In full reaction from the fervour of devotion into which I had been thrown by Barbara's last and noblest altruism, I brooded miserably over the passing of Whern. A chapter was over, a chapter of folly and arrogance and sin, but at the same time one of courage and dignity. The heedless, chaotic world would reel on its way, and the wreck of Braden pass unnoticed by all save the handful

of survivors struggling on spars and in small boats to an alien shore. It was a pretty record—the final stage of the Braden peerage. "Harold, fourth Viscount Whern, was shot in his own demesne by the brother of a girl he had seduced. . . . Michael, fifth Viscount Whern, killed himself in despair after a few years' struggle against the faults of an elder (and a younger) brother. . . . Richard, sixth Viscount Whern, guilty in all but actual fact of an intrigue with his brother's wife, sold the ancestral house and fled the country, because he dared not face the future, and because to him passion was more than honour. . . ." Bitterly I framed in some such words as these the concluding sentences of the history of Braden that a painstaking book-maker of fifty years hence would surely compile. Then Barbara spoke, and I got ready to continue playing my futile part.

"What are you going to do, Richard? Tell me as exactly as you can."

Her voice was perfectly calm, but lifeless and so indifferent that I glanced nervously towards her. She was sitting back and down into the seat, as though broken with extreme weariness. Her eyes were heavy and sad, and her sullen mouth drooped in fatigue. When I replied, it was with a mechanical aloofness suited to her mood.

"I shall hand over to the lawyers the entire business of the sale. They will have instructions for the disposal of the money if the transaction is completed. If it is not—so much the worse, but I refuse to spoil your life or my own by useless

waiting. Almost at once I shall go abroad. It will be necessary for me to turn into some incredible form of dago. In due course I shall send you word and you will join me. It is quite simple."

"Am I to be Viscountess Whern, new and pirated edition ?" she asked.

I winced at the misery of her sarcasm.

"No, child," I replied softly. "You will be rs. Richard Braden."

For a little while she was silent. Then whimsically:

"Poor Anthony !"

"Keep your pity for your son, sweetheart, although even on him it may be wasted. He could fight to revive the cursed thing if he cared to. Whether he will succeed no one can say. Few things are more difficult to kill than an unwanted title, or to revive than an extinct one."

We threaded a raucous way through the drays and tram-cars of the western suburbs. At her door Barbara got out. She turned on the pavement and leant a moment on the car-side. Her eyes were raised piteously to mine.

"Richard," she whispered, "please, please. . . . I do so wish it !"

"I forbade you so much as to imagine that dreadful thing again," I said roughly. "Oblige me by putting it out of your head."

And I leant forward to start the engine.

"It's terrible !" she began. "I cannot bear . . ."

At a quick glance from me she drew herself together and stepped back from the car.

"Good-bye, Richard," she said quietly. "I shall be ready when you wish it."

As I glided from the kerb I looked back. She was still standing by the railing of her tiny house, proud and beautiful, but the face that topped the furs coiled about her shoulders was set with suffering, and in the eyes was desperate pleading. I wrenched my head away and drove rapidly eastward. In that evil moment it seemed that I might never see her again—that I had that day set eyes for the last time both on my inheritance and on the woman for whose sake I had abandoned it.

CHAPTER XIV

1.

I LEFT London in November and arrived without incident in Florence. The choice of refuge had proved sadly limited, but I was grateful, at once for the possibility of Italy and for the abnormal circumstance that allowed me to go there in that last winter of Europe's torment. I only stayed long enough in the city to set on foot the legal processes necessary to my happiness. Then I retired to Lucca and, in a charming house against the northern ramparts, settled into obscurity to serve my years for Rachel. But I was hardly installed when the disaster of Caparetto hurled into my solitude the piteous flood of homeless and orphans from the tortured north. Lucca became a turmoil. With a dull rage against this infusion of war and its senselessness into my secret purgatory, I did what lay in my power to help suffering innocence. Probably I was always a war-hater, but contact with Mary and her theories had in England set me in opposition to those who proclaimed, in security and without elegance, their unpopular beliefs. Now, in the surge of Lucca and its misery, I went to the other extreme, and even wrote to Mary a long letter of recantation. It was never posted—I had too bitter a

respect for the censorship—but it reflected a mood. With the passing of time and the slow return of my solitude to its wistful beauty, the one indignation showed itself as transitory as the other, and I came to a truer sense of the tragedy of our time. I understood that what the old England died to save, but lost, was what Michael died to save, but came too late even to enjoy beyond the narrow borders of his own idealism.

Letters passed between me and Barbara with moderate regularity. Hers brought me news of home doings and, more precious, those words that come hardly to the English even when they love. These latter are so manifestly my own that I make no apology for their suppression; the former, justifiable enough as part of this record of family, I prefer, now at its eleventh hour, to leave untold. There is precedent for such omission, and that my conception of autobiography is capricious my treatment of war narrative has already but too clearly shown.

Wearily the time passed. She grew impatient. The vivid Italian spring merged into heat unbearable. I sought such relief as conditions of my residence allowed. She wrote imploringly; life was intolerable; would I, for mere prudery, condemn her to more months of suffering? The cruelty hurt, but not so keenly as my pity for her loneliness. Into my reply went all the tenderness, all the passion that I had for her. By the sanctity of our love I begged her to endure. Her answer, delayed many weeks, was of a few words only,

but words of such humility and gentleness that they were as a faint, suppliant gesture of her hand. Only in silence could my heart be hardened. I wrote no more.

At last, unbelievably, came release. My term was served. She must start on her journey. She had started and was coming to marry me. I set out to meet her in Milan. It was in a cold and snow-bound city that, with slow delight, I staged the first scene of my real life.

2.

Outside the barrier I mingled with the aimless miscellany that seems at all hours to throng a great station. A faint copper-coloured mist hovered in the shadowy vaulting of the roof, around the pendant arc-lights, across the high tier of lighted windows that overlook the spaces of the station. Far to the left an engine hissed; a hand-truck clattered towards the luggage hall. Stragglers in black coats, with black portfolios clutched in black gloves, trickled through the gate of one of the outgoing suburban platforms. The bland face of the huge clock registered half-past ten. The place seemed to be turning and muttering in its sleep, so unreal were the noises and activity. It was cold in the station. I shivered and began to walk. Groups of soldiers in grey-green slouched past the window of my abstraction. The copper-coloured mist surged, thickened and dispersed again. They were like the noises of

the sea—the far, far noises of this echoing place. The hands of the clock moved idly forward. A quarter to eleven. I collided with a woman carrying a large basket. Interchange of courtesies. Through the door of the *consigne* I saw shelves like the shelves of a catacomb. They were laden with absurd luggage—rugs in straps; queer, shiny valises; crude, sharp-cornered yellow trunks. To my freakish mood these seemed the bodies of the spirits that thronged this eerie cave. I had the idea that to-morrow they would have been fetched away and be walking about Milan like ordinary respectable men and women. Like me—and Barbara. Barbara was coming. A sudden vision of her, as I had seen her last, lit my foolish brain like a searchlight. The patient dignity of her attitude, the suffering in her eyes . . . All that was over now. Triumph surged through me and the phantoms of my brooding dissolved into the mist that curled above my head. To-morrow she would belong to me. We would drive away together, just she and I, to our flat, to our marriage-bed. Italy—war-worn and distraught, but for ever the land of lovers—would croon her age-long epithalamy.

A bell clanged. The sluggish officials quickened to eagerness. I moved towards the barrier. From the darkness beyond the station roof emerged a black bulk crowned with steam. The steam billowed and swelled until it seemed a tidal wave bearing down upon me. From the heart of it glared a single eye. Passengers dropped painfully

from the train, as though squeezed out of a tube. The vanguard of bag-laden porters reached the barrier. Figures, strange figures, drifted past me; they ignored me so utterly and were themselves to me so trivial that I felt gifted with invisibility. More figures slowly passing, more strange figures.

Then I saw her, waved to her, ran to meet her, felt her hands in mine. But from the wave crest of my emotion the devil of ridicule raised his head. The love I had for her, the love I longed to speak aloud, choked me. What was I, after all, but Richard Braden meeting his brother's widow at a railway-station? I bent over her hands.

"I hope you had a good journey?"

"I got a smut in my eye," she said.

3.

The car stole through the white streets, its noise muted by the blanket of silence that lay upon the city. If we spoke, our remarks had best have remained unsaid, so impertinent were they to the splendour of the hour. This atmosphere of baulked emotion brooded and brooded over me. A sleepless night, the tedious mechanism of marriage, should have broken this miserable reserve. But I was as speechless, as frozen, as when I had left her at the hotel the night before; as when I had called for her that very afternoon; as when together we had emerged from the meagre ceremony

that had been so hardly won; as when, in foolish flight from our own gaucherie, we had dined amid the gilt and glitter of a huge restaurant and endured the vapourings of stage romance. At the flat supper was awaiting us. I sat and looked at her. Where her hair swept back over her ears it shone like polished copper; the triangles of brilliant light, one on each side of the broad white parting, held my vision to the exclusion of all else. Her head hovered against the darkness like a giant moth with burnished wings. The constraint was terrible. The room with its sombre privacy was alive with passion; only we two were dead. The candles flickered and the whiteness of her throat quivered from darkness to light, from light to darkness again. The shadows crept closer. I felt her slipping from me. The candles would flicker out and leave only emptiness. Already she was curling upwards with the smoke of her cigarette, curling upwards and fading into mist. In agony I cried out:

"Barbara!"

She did not move. Her head still drooped over her plate, her hand still lay relaxed upon the cloth. I realised I had made no sound. Was she suffering this same misery?

Suddenly she raised her head and looked at me. Her eyes were dark with longing.

"Dick!" she whispered.

With what seemed an effort of physical strength I rose, ran to her and, dropping on my knees, put my arms about her. I felt her hand caress my

hair. Her touch snapped the chain of idiot speechlessness.

"Oh, my dear, to think that it has come!"

"It was bound to come, darling."

"I love you, I love you. . . . Child, there is no end now . . . always and always."

"I am ready, sweetheart."

"We played the game, Barbara."

"God bless you, Dick!"

We rose and stood trembling, each leaning a little towards the other.

"I cannot even carry you to bed, princess. See what a pitiful creature!"

She smiled through tears.

"You have not kissed me yet—properly."

I took her dear shoulders in my hands and held her at arm's length.

"Dearest heart, I starve for you, but . . ."

"I understand," she said, and slipped from the room.

I blew out the candles and went to the window. The clocks of the city were striking midnight, and I exulted that the new day should find Barbara here in my house and myself thus complete. The trees far below threw a film of white between me and trodden slush of the pavement. Across the shoulder of an intervening block I saw the pinnacles of the Cathedral. The violet glare of hidden street lamps threw its pretentious bulk askew, and it looked like a white-haired giant, bound and helpless, tilted against the sky in the centre of a funeral pyre. I saw in it a symbol

of my dead life, monstrous and too ornate, abandoned to the flames of a new and splendid happiness.

A door clicked behind me. On the threshold of her room, silhouetted against its brilliance, stood Barbara. She wore a dark wrap, and her hair hung loose about her shoulders.

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